ANTHEM SCREEN SPOTLIGHT

THE LAST OF US

THE ESSENTIAL FAN GUIDE

100% UNOFFICIAL

THE INSIDE STORY ON THE CULT CLASSIC

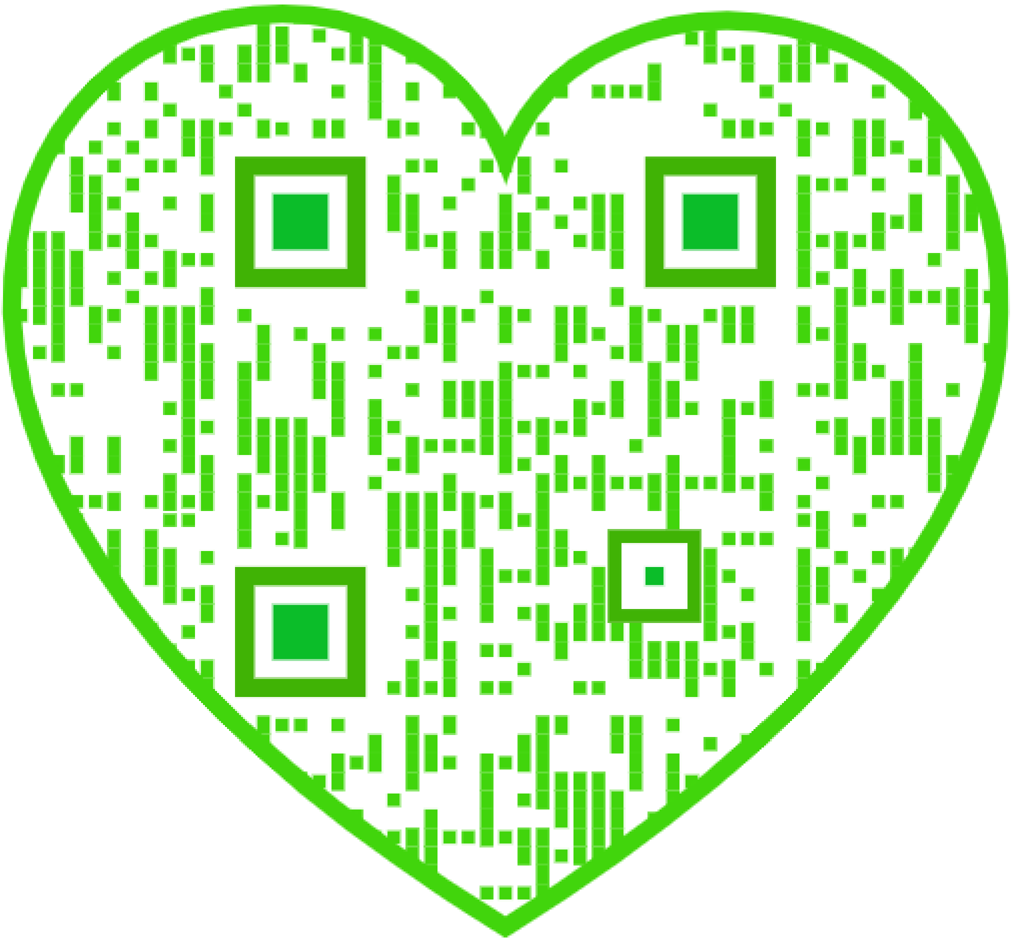
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SEASONS 1+2

COMPLETE S1 EPISODE GUIDE

MEET THE STARS

THE LAST OF US A-Z

PLUS COULD THE LAST OF US ACTUALLY HAPPEN? WE TALK TO THOSE THAT KNOW



WELCOME

The world of entertainment is littered with examples of beloved video games that have made disappointing TV shows. *The Last Of Us*, fortunately, isn't one of them.

It's rare for an adaptation of a game to be so acclaimed (season one was nominated for a staggering 24 Emmys) and indeed popular (averaging almost 32 million viewers per episode). It's a programme that's as adored by gamers as it is by viewers new to the franchise, and after its debut on HBO in 2023, it became one of the year's talking-point television shows (*The Guardian* ranked it No.6 on their Top 50 list of the best TV of '23, while *Empire* placed it at No.3).

So this special is a celebration of not just one of the greatest games ever, but a TV show that's already being talked about as an all-time classic. In this issue, we have a comprehensive episode guide to season one, breaking down each instalment with a wealth of – we trust – interesting facts and figures, as well as features on showrunners Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann and stars Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey. Elsewhere, we have an exhaustive A to Z of the series, plus articles on the show's iconic title sequence, the differences between the game and the TV version and a survival guide should – touch wood – there be a Cordyceps outbreak in real life. And talking of that, what are the chances of a pandemic like the one we see in the series actually happening? Head to page 72, where we talk to those in the know about how plausible *The Last Of Us* really is.

That's not all. We also have features on the best and worst video game adaptations ever and we speculate on the long-term future of *The Last Of Us* franchise. Oh, and if you think your knowledge of the show is mastermind-level, check out our quiz on page 94!

We hope you enjoy this deep dive into all things *The Last Of Us*. And always remember, "When you're lost in the darkness, look for the light".

Steve

STEVE O'BRIEN, EDITOR

UNSPLASH

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HBO, SKY; FRONT COVER IMAGES HBO, SKY

PEDRO PASCAL

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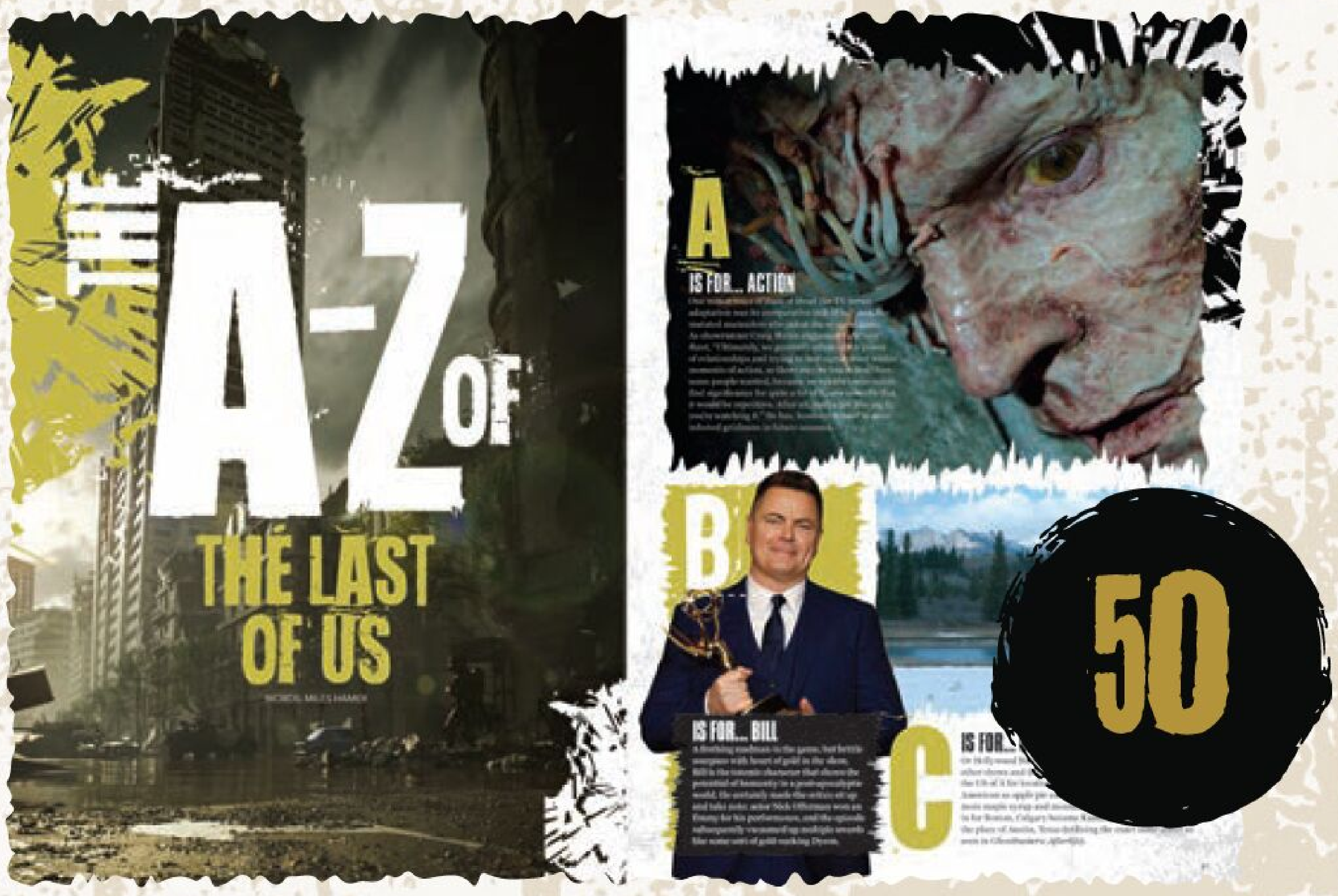
THE A-Z OF THE LAST OF US

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XBOX JURY – THE BEST & WORST VIDEO GAME ADAPTATIONS ON SCREEN

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THE LAST OF US

THE STORY SO FAR

THE LAST OF US HAS BEEN A GAME PHENOMENON, AND IS NOW A TELEVISION ONE. STEVE O'BRIEN LOOKS BACK AT HOW NEIL DRUCKMANN AND BRUCE STRALEY'S POST-APOCALYPTIC MASTERPIECE BECAME NOT ONLY ONE OF THE TOP-RATED VIDEO GAMES OF ALL TIME, BUT AN INSTANT TV CLASSIC…

There are few franchises that are able to conquer two mediums. There have been video games that have been beloved and genuinely moved the artform on, but have made rotten movies, and there have been so-so games that have made surprisingly decent feature films and TV shows. Normally, it's because Hollywood or the television networks make so many changes that the adaptation is virtually unrecognisable to fans of the game. Most of the time, the video game makers have been written a whopping big cheque, then told to piss off, while a whole different group of creatives get to work on readying their baby for the big or small screen. But HBO was smart with *The Last Of Us*. Unafraid, like many studios, to call its new drama a video game adaptation, it made co-creator Neil Druckmann an executive producer on the show. But this was no honorary title, to reassure long-time fans – make no mistake, he's in the driving seat of the television series just as much as showrunner Craig Mazin, making sure this version sticks loyally – give and take – to the narrative laid down in the game.

Ellie and Joel – and a hungry infected – in the video game.

GAMING GLORY

By the time *The Last Of Us* aired its first episode on 15 January 2023, the game had been around for just under 10 years. Debuting via game developer Naughty Dog (*Uncharted*, *Jak And Daxter*) in June 2013, it was an immediate success. "We were surprised at how well it was received," Druckmann told *VentureBeat*, shortly after its launch. "The story is a little more subtle and the material is a little more mature. The gameplay is a little harder, more complicated than what we've done in the past. We thought we would have a smaller audience, or that it would be more divisive as far as how people's reactions. But we were pleasantly surprised."

A sequel, *The Last Of Us Part II*, followed in 2020, with a remake of the first game, titled *The Last Of Us Part I*, released in 2022. Over the years, the games have amassed a mountain of awards and are regularly cited on lists of the greatest video games ever. *Rolling Stone*, in a 2025 article, placed it at number five, with only *Super Mario World*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Tetris* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* above it, saying of the game: "It can be tough for games to be taken seriously as a narrative medium, but *The Last Of Us* is a perfect example of how powerful it can be when it works. The follow-up to Naughty Dog's playable action movie *Uncharted*, it genuinely

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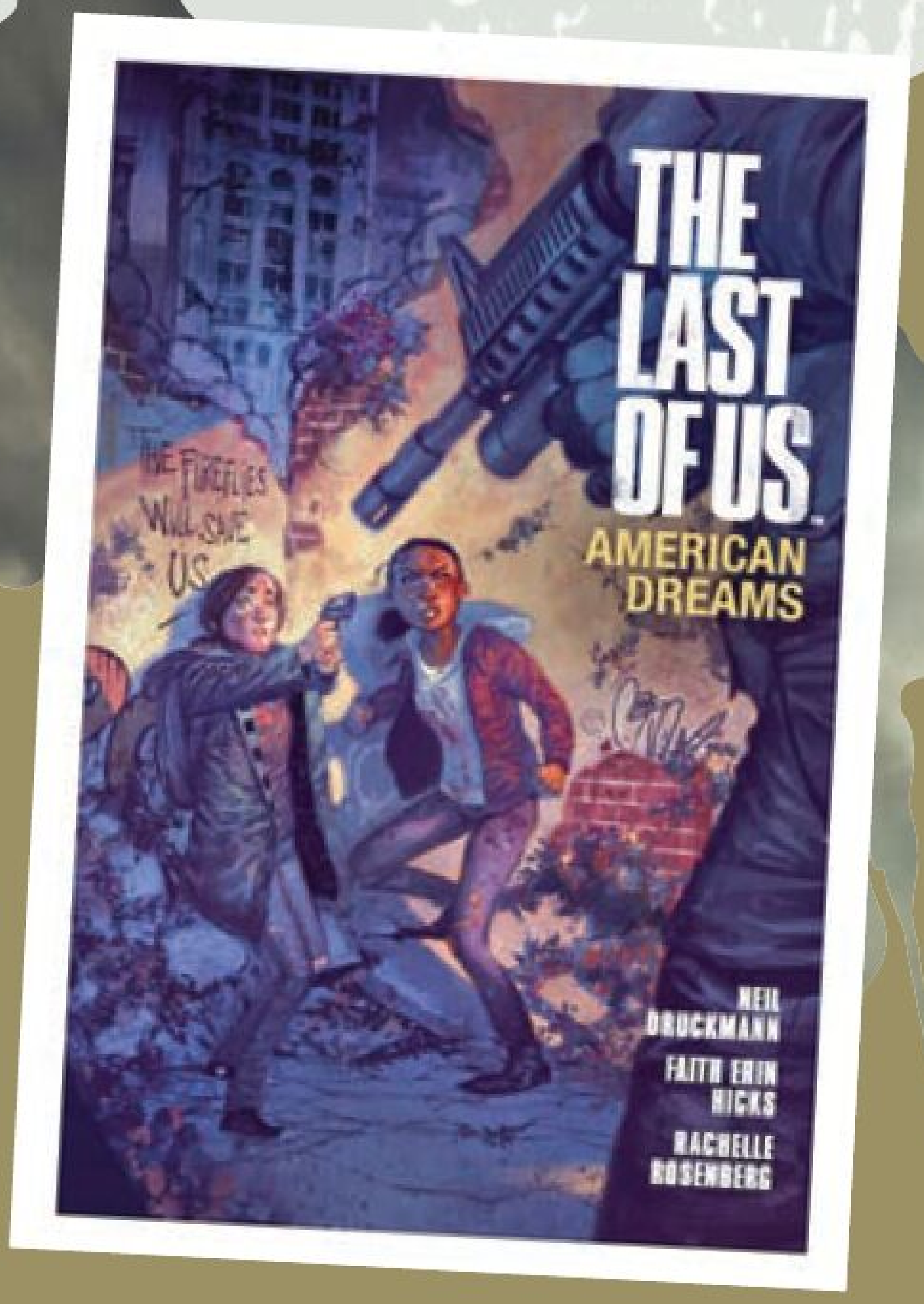
THE LAST OF US
DIRECTOR
JASMILA ZBANIC
CAMERA
CHRISTINE A. MAIER, BVK AAC
Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey taking on the iconic roles.

“[WE] GOT THE SCRIPT TO A GOOD PLACE AND IT KIND OF ENTERED DEVELOPMENT HELL LIKE THESE THINGS DO”

matches Hollywood’s storytelling potential at every turn.”

With gameplay like that, Hollywood were of course watching. In 2014, Sony secured a deal with Naughty Dog and announced a film version which was to be produced by *The Evil Dead*’s Sam Raimi. Only it never progressed much further than that, with Druckmann telling *IGN* a few years later, “[We] got the script to a good place and it kind of entered development hell like these things tend to do. There hasn’t been any work done on it in over a year and a half.” Druckmann later clarified that the movie fell apart as the studio was focused on big action set-pieces, whereas he felt it was better suited to be a smaller, indie-type film.

After Sony’s rights expired in 2019, it was now HBO’s turn. *The Last Of Us*’ sprawling narrative always



THE COMIC BOOK

The origins of *The Last Of Us*’ first – and so far only – comic book spinoff can be traced back to before the first game even launched. Dark Horse Comics approached Neil Druckmann during the video game’s development process, keen to produce a tie-in comic book series. Druckmann, a comics fan, was enthusiastic but “didn’t want to do something tangential”. An admirer of the graphic novel *Friends With Boys*, Druckmann picked its writer and artist Faith Erin Hicks as his collaborator on the project, soon titled *The Last Of Us: American Dreams*. Together they fashioned a story that centred on Ellie, in a time before the events of the game. Naughty Dog had originally planned to include Ellie’s backstory as a gameplay sequence, but ultimately decided that “it didn't fit with the overall structure,” as Druckmann explained to *Wired*. “It delayed the meeting between Joel and Ellie and we needed to get to that as soon as possible since their bond is the heart of the story.” Druckmann allowed Hicks space to create a new character, a teenage girl called Riley, who befriends Ellie in the story. Hicks was given the freedom to design Riley from the bottom up, including her appearance, characteristics and most of her dialogue. “It felt like a good way to split it, where [Hicks] would own Riley and I would own Ellie,” Druckmann explained. Planned as four issues, the first was published on 3 April 2013, selling out, with a reprint arriving on 29 May alongside the second issue. Reviews were mostly positive, *Bloody Disgusting* praising the fourth issue for delivering “authentic drama and raw intensity” and *SciFiNow* calling the art style “expressive and relaxed” while naming Hicks “one of the best artists of her generation”. *Geeks Of Doom*, meanwhile, found Hicks’ depiction of the infected as “in pain and desperate” to be “especially harrowing”.

made it better suited to the long-form narrative offered by TV, as opposed to squeezing its story into a two-hour movie. So when the pay television network behind *The Sopranos* and *Game Of Thrones* announced it was taking on Naughty Dog's game, fans breathed a sigh of relief.

It helped that the man tasked with shaping it into a TV series – alongside Bruckmann – was a fan of the game. When writer Craig Mazin first played *The Last Of Us* in 2013, he said to himself, “Someone's going to adapt this [for TV or film], and it's going to be awesome, but it won't be me.”

Fast forward five years and Mazin found himself approached by PlayStation Productions, with Carter Swan, the publisher's senior producer of IP expansion, presenting him with a list of titles that they believed would work on the small screen. Except his favourite game wasn't on there, as Sony were still beavering away on their ill-fated movie.

So when the rights reverted to PlayStation just one year later, Mazin set his sights on *The Last Of Us*. Before long, he'd arranged a lunch with Druckmann and the two hit it off instantly.

“A week later, we pitched to HBO and that's it,” Mazin told *The Washington Post* in 2023. “We've been going lightspeed ever since.”

Together, Mazin and Druckmann decided that the first season would tell the story of that first game, and planned out nine episodes. With Mazin, whose previous success had been the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, in charge of the scripts, he fired hundreds of questions at Druckmann during pre-production, working out what elements from the game to keep versus what to invent or go deeper on. While the TV series would adhere to much of the lore of the game it shouldn't be beholden to it, Mazin and Druckmann figured. Thus when it came to casting the two leads, the showrunner instructed them not to play the game, as they didn't want the actors to do impersonations via the characterisations from the original.

“I didn't coach [Bella Ramsey] to do Ellie's [video game] mannerisms,” Mazin told *The Washington Post*. “I didn't coach her [sic] to do Ellie's rhythms. I didn't coach her to do anything, except inside of the scenes I let her know what the intentions were in the dialogue and in the text.”

While they didn't want to limit the actors' performances, in other areas, there was no ambiguity: the TV had to honour the game. An important decision was to bring in the video game's art director, concept artists and environment team to give notes on the production's costumes and sets.

“Everything that we do comes out of respect for the game and not blind respect but earned respect,” Mazin told *The Wrap*. “There's nothing about this that was perfunctory. It was always just about love.” Drackmann added that the adaptation would make changes from its source material where it “makes sense”, saying, “There are certain things that work in the games that just don't work in the show and they have to kind of evolve.”

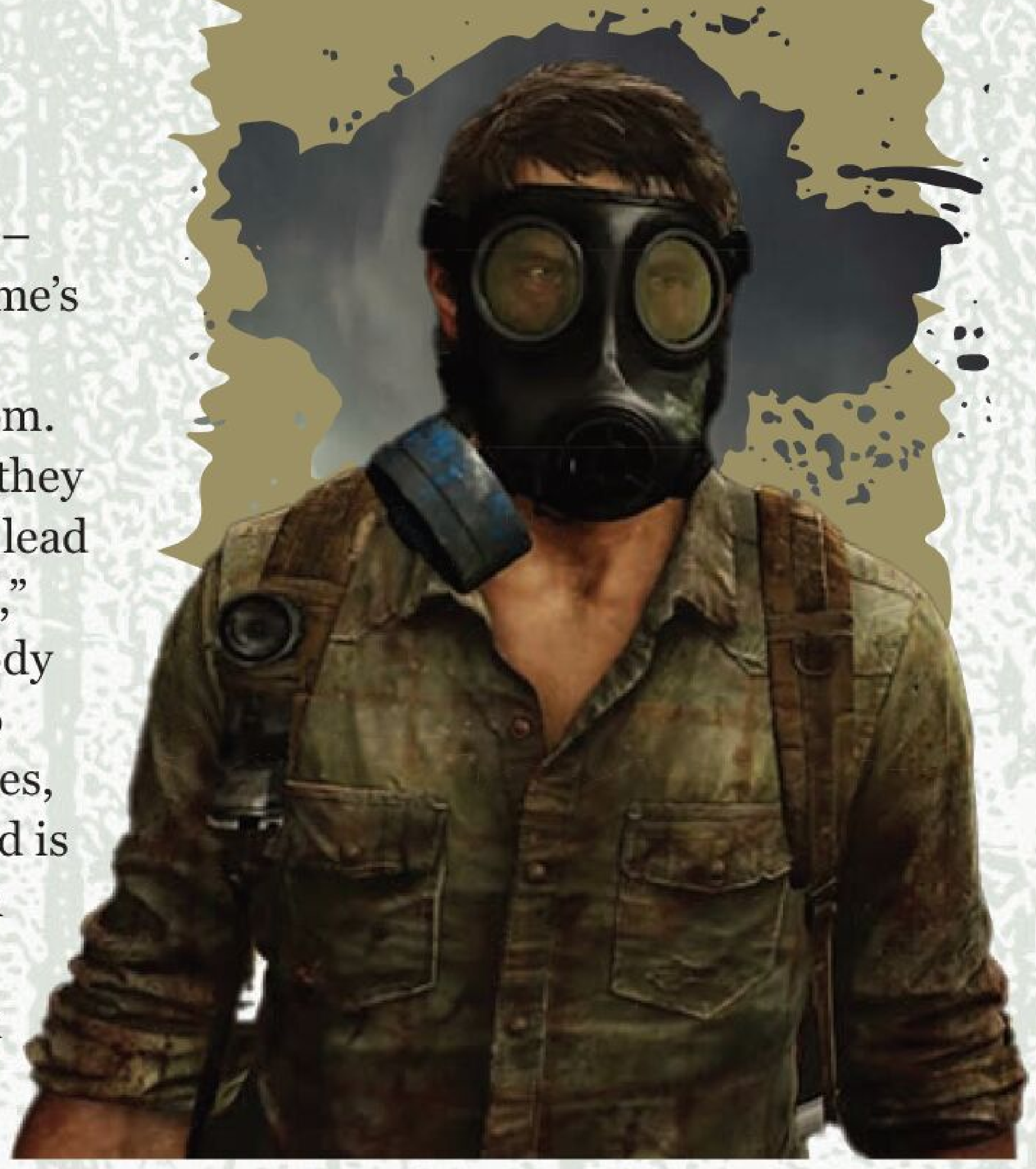
CASTING CALLS

With pre-production occurring – rather aptly, considering the game's themes – during the pandemic, casting was conducted over Zoom. As Druckmann told *The Wrap*, they needed someone special for the lead role. “What's important for Joel,” he explained, “is to find somebody that's not only tough, and Pedro [Pascal] clearly has that in spades, but someone that is tortured and is vulnerable and has been broken down over these really difficult 20 years where they survived in this world. And someone that's going to connect with Ellie

“EVERYTHING THAT WE DO COMES OUT OF RESPECT FOR THE GAME... NOT BLIND RESPECT BUT EARNED LOVE”

LOSE THE MASKS!

In the video game version of *The Last Of Us*, the characters are often seen wearing gas masks to protect themselves from the fungus. But obviously on TV, it's important to see the actors' faces, and so the decision was made to, well, jettison the face masks. “We lose so much,” Neil Druckmann told *Polygon*, “which is maybe the most important part of the journey is what's going on inside behind their eyes, in their soul, in their beings. For that logistical reason, we were like, ‘Let's find a different vector.'”



Storm Reid plays Ellie's friend – and crush – Riley in episode seven, *Left Behind*.

The actors had previously both appeared in HBO's *Game Of Thrones*.

“THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT THIS THAT WAS PERFUNCTORY. IT WAS ALWAYS JUST ABOUT LOVE”

and is funny and is charismatic, but is having the discipline as an actor to suppress all that and let it peek out at the right moment to really draw you in these really kind of fascinating ways.”

Already well-known for his role as Oberyn Martell in *Game Of Thrones*, Pascal auditioned online. But when he was told he'd got the job he'd just taken the sleeping drug Ambien, and didn't take the news in, as he told talk show host Jimmy Fallon later on. The actor said that he was in London having late-night conversations with Craig Mazin, who was in Los Angeles at the time. “They were like, ‘Will you stay up a little bit later…’ – at this point, it was getting kind of late in London – ‘…to talk to Neil Druckmann, the creator of the video game?’

“I take an Ambien to go to sleep just in case,” the actor continued. “They've got my adrenaline going and my hopes up… but I get a call and I get told that I got the job after I took the Ambien. And so I was excited, I guess, but I didn't remember!

“I woke up in the morning and the first thing that occurred to me was, ‘Aww man, I really want that job… I'm gonna wait by the phone all day long. This hasn't happened in a while. I'm gonna think about it all day.’” Then, after looking at his phone, he realised he *had* been successful. “I was like, ‘Oh yeah! I got the job!’”

For the role of Ellie, meanwhile, Bella Ramsey was one of around

HBO max
THE LAST OF US
HBO max
THE LAST OF US

The cast of the show at HBO's LA premiere in January 2023.

"CHILDREN HAVEN'T HAD THAT MUCH LIFE EXPERIENCE. IT'S HARD TO FIND KIDS THAT CAN EMBODY THIS"

100 actors who auditioned, but as Druckman admitted, it was clear immediately that they were the one.

"She had to be really smart, she had to be resourceful, she had to be quirky, she had to really push against authority and have all this potential for violence of where her story eventually goes," he explained about what they were looking for in Ellie. "When we watched Bella's audition tape, it just felt so natural. And there was no question in our minds for this story, this is our Ellie."

He went on to explain to *SFX* magazine that Ellie was a much harder character to cast than Joel. "We're trying to cast a 14-year-old girl and acting is an incredibly difficult thing to do, right? It's an easy thing to do terribly. It's a hard thing to do okay. But it's a really, really hard thing to do brilliantly. And children haven't had that much life experience. It's hard to find kids that can embody this."

Like their co-star, Ramsey – who was 17 when they auditioned – had been a regular in *Game Of Thrones*, having played Lyanna Mormont between 2016 and 2019.

"I feel like it made us come from a family without knowing each other already," Pascal told *EW* about the two actors' shared experience. "To have two characters that the fans liked make their entrance and make their exit is parallel for the both of us and a kind of bonding thing before we even got a chance to bond."

There were initial fan jitters, however, when *USA Today* published an interview with Ramsey, detailing how they were told not to play the game. Mazin recalled that "it was frustrating to know what we had and to see people doubting."

"[Fans] should be encouraged," he told *The Washington Post* in 2023. "It's our job. It's Neil's job, and my job, to put all of Ellie and Joel on the page. We know Ellie and Joel completely. We know them inside and out, not only as they were manifested in such a beautiful way by [the characters' in-game actors] Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson, but just from the ground up as Neil thought it all through. And as he and I created these new versions."

The show was a major commission for HBO and the company afforded it the generous budget it deserved. Each episode was given a shooting time of around two and half weeks, far more than an average network TV show.

"Network television will ask their showrunners to shoot seven to eight pages [of the script] a day," Mazin

Hankies ready for the emotional episode *Long, Long Time.*

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO, SONY, NAUGHTY DOG

told *The Washington Post*. “We shot more like 18-19 days per episode, [which amounted to] two and a half pages a day, maybe three.”

The series shot for 200 days, entirely in Canada, being the largest ever production based in ‘The Great White North’. This was a high-status series for HBO, and anticipation from fans was sky-high. Would this be another video game to TV bomb, or that rarest of beasts, an adaptation that satisfied gamers *and* those who had never been near a console? While fans were cautiously optimistic, the one group, it seemed, that had low expectations were critics.

CRITICAL MASS

An indicator of how game-to-TV adaptations were viewed prior to *The Last Of Us* airing was in the title of *The New Yorker*’s piece about the show – ‘Can A Video Game Be Prestige TV?’ In the piece, the writer quotes Druckmann insisting that the show – which had yet to air – “will be the best, most authentic game adaptation,” to which Mazin butts in, “That’s not the highest bar in the world.”

HBO, then, would have breathed a sigh of relief when those first reviews landed. “It is moving, surprisingly romantic, and one of the finest hours of television in recent memory,” raved *Empire* about the show’s opening episode, *When You’re Lost In The Darkness*, while *The Guardian* wrote, “This desperately moving drama set in a zombie-ravaged US is a phenomenal blend of horror and heart, with a cast that could not be more perfect,” adding that it was “one of the finest TV shows you will see this year”. The first season currently holds an approval rating of 96% on reviews aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes* – that’s higher than *The Sopranos*, regularly cited as the greatest TV show of all time.

The Last Of Us, then, is a true phenomenon, in being a much-loved game that’s become a much-cherished TV show. And both are fuelling the others’ popularity. There have been those who have been introduced to *The Last Of Us* via HBO’s show who have gone on to devour the game and those that have been hardcore gamers who have found ever more to admire in the TV adaptation. And HBO couldn’t be happier either – with *Game Of Thrones* gone, *The Last Of Us* has become its signature series, winning critical plaudits and a tonne of awards.

“My life has been insane. I don’t know how I ended up here,” Druckmann told *Deadline* after the show’s season finale ended up winning record-breaking audiences (8.2 million same-day viewers) for HBO. “This [concept] started as a small student project, turned into a video game, and now it’s this incredible TV show. I’m just incredibly grateful to be part of this journey.” ■

THE BOARD GAME

The Last Of Us’ first tabletop game, titled _The Last Of Us: Escape The Dark_, was released in November 2024. As manufacturer Themeborne describe it: “Powered by the latest evolution of the _Escape The Dark_ system, [the game] offers solo and co-op multiplayer modes, allowing up to five players to experience this iconic setting in a brand-new way. Playing as a group of survivors, you will weave your own unique story of survival and companionship as you explore an open-world map.”

Talking about his reason for choosing Themeborne, Neil Druckmann explained: “I’ve been a massive fan of Themeborne’s board games. Now I couldn’t be happier to see their game design continue to evolve with _The Last Of Us_! We’re excited to see Joel, Ellie and more take on new life.”

The game was released to warm reviews. “Themeborne has been wowing gamers with its atmospheric and clever _Escape The Dark_ series for years now,” wrote _Starburst_. “These fun, card-based adventure games weave dark stories of desperation and survival with very little effort. Their latest variant [is] a must-have gift for fans of horror. Or mushrooms.” _Wargames_, meanwhile, enthused that it was “an extremely rare thing for a board gamer – it’s a video game adaptation that manages to do something different.

“Not everyone will vibe with its luck-heavy cruelty,” the site’s Mollie Russell went on, “but as a lover of thematic and hard-hitting games, I’m a fan.”

THE LAST OF US
ESCAPE THE DARK
THE LAST OF US
ESCAPE THE DARK

Bella Ramsey with showrunners Craig Mazin (left) and Neil Druckmann.

PEDRO PASCAL

THERE AREN'T MANY ACTORS IN THE WORLD AS HOT RIGHT NOW AS THE MAN BORN JOSÉ PEDRO BALMACEDA PASCAL. YET IT WAS A LONG AND ROCKY ROAD TO SUPERSTARDOM…

It's strange to think that, just over 10 years ago, few of us had heard of Pedro Pascal. Yet now, this man who is very nearly 50 is not just one of the most in-demand actors in the world, but also a late-period heartthrob, beating *The Bear*'s Jeremy Allen White (age 33), rapper Bad Bunny (age 30) and *Bridgerton*'s Jonathan Bailey (age 36) to be named Grindr's 'Hottest Man of the Year' in 2024. Not bad for an actor who, just a decade ago, was scraping a living doing one-off character parts in a host of network TV shows.

"He's talked about this publicly," Pedro's friend the actor Sarah Paulson told *Esquire*, "but there were times when I would give him my per diem from a job I was working on so that he could have money to feed himself."

"I died so many deaths," the actor added about how he struggled early in his career. "My vision of it was that if I didn't have some major exposure by the time I was 29 years old, it was over, so I was constantly readjusting what it meant to commit my life to this profession."

Well, thank god he did. Through hard work and heroic tenacity, that break did come when he was cast as Oberyn Martell, the hot-headed brother of the head of House Martell in HBO's hit series *Game Of Thrones*. From here on, the jobs came thick and fast – DEA agent Javier Peña in Netflix's *Narcos* and the title role in Disney+'s *The Mandalorian*, as well as front-line parts in such movies as *The Equalizer 2*, *Wonder Woman 1984* (as the movie's Big Bad, Maxwell Lord), as billionaire playboy (and the world's biggest *Paddington 2* fan) Javi Gutiérrez in *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent*, as well as a starring role in Ridley Scott's 2024 *Gladiator* sequel.

This year, we get to see him not only return as Joel Miller in *The Last Of Us*, but make his Marvel Cinematic Universe debut as Reed Richards (aka Mr Fantastic) in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, a role he's set to reprise in the next two Avengers movies, *Doomsday* (2026) and *Secret Wars* (2027). Then there's the *Mandalorian* spin-off film, the first *Star Wars* motion picture since 2017's *The Rise Of Skywalker*, and also the upcoming black comedy *Eddington*, where he stars alongside Joaquin Phoenix and Emma Stone.

It seems every studio and network wants a piece of Pedro Pascal at the moment. In 2023, *Time* magazine named the actor as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, with his friend Paulson quoted as saying that Pascal's "interior light burns so bright, it's simply taken some time for your eyes to adjust. But now that you've seen him, you know too. He's the whole motherfucking deal." ■

Instagram @pascalispunk

ONE OF PASCAL'S BESTIES IS ACTOR OSCAR ISAAC, WHOM HE FIRST MET WORKING ON AN OFF-BROADWAY PLAY.

BORN IN CHILE, PASCAL'S FAMILY FLED THE COUNTRY SHORTLY AFTER GENERAL PINOCHET'S COUP.

WONDER WOMAN 1984 WASN'T PASCAL'S FIRST BRUSH WITH WONDER WOMAN, HAVING STARRED IN AN UNAIRED TV PILOT IN 2011.

ONE OF PEDRO'S FIRST ACTING ROLES WAS ON THE '90S TV SERIES *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*. HE APPEARED IN A FOURTH-SEASON EPISODE PLAYING A COLLEGE STUDENT NAMED EDDIE.

THE ACTOR'S FAVOURITE SONG IS PRINCE'S *PURPLE RAIN*. "FOR ME, *PURPLE RAIN* IS THE MOST EMOTIONALLY CATHARTIC, THE MOST MUSICALLY SOPHISTICATED SONG THAT I CAN THINK OF," THE ACTOR TOLD *HOT ONES* HOST SEAN EVANS.

PEDRO'S SISTER LUX IS TRANSGENDER, COMING OUT AS A TRANS WOMAN IN 2021.

STAR FOCUS

BELLA RAMSAY

THE BRITISH ACTOR WON THE ROLE OF ELLIE OVER 100 HOPEFULS, AND PROVIDES *THE LAST OF US* WITH SOME OF ITS SASSIEST MOMENTS…

If global stardom came late to Pedro Pascal, it's the opposite for his *The Last Of Us* co-star. While Pascal was nudging 40 when he made his *Game Of Thrones* debut, Bella Ramsey was just 13 when they won the role of the spiky Lyanna Mormont, and since then things have barely stopped for the now 21-year-old actor.

Born in Nottingham, Ramsey (who identifies as non-binary) started acting at the age of four, through the Loughborough branch of Stagecoach Theatre Arts, before going on to study at the Television Workshop (a Midlands-based drama group for young people). As well as *Game Of Thrones*, they also nabbed a starring role in the BBC's adaptation of Jill Murphy's *The Worst Witch* books (for which they won a Best Young Performer Children's BAFTA) and in 2020 appeared in six episodes of the cult sci-fi series *His Dark Materials*.

Ramsey's biggest break, however, would come in 2021, when they beat out over 100 actors for the role of Ellie in *The Last Of Us*. For co-creator Neil Druckmann, it was clear HBO had struck gold. "Bella felt so real," Druckmann enthused to *The Hollywood Reporter*. "It was like Ellie realised in live action. It didn't feel like watching an actor."

For their part, Ramsey felt a kinship to the teenage Ellie, telling *THR*, "[She] felt like a character I already had in me. Like the skins that you wear in a video game? She was one of my skins already."

Except there was one big difference between Bella and Ellie, in that Ellie is American and Bella is British, which meant the actor adopting a totally different accent. Ramsey has won glowing reviews for their accent work in *The Last Of Us*, but, as they told *The One Show*, it's sometimes hard to remember which voice is which. "I woke up speaking American… It happened last week," they revealed to the hosts. "I don't know why it's happening, I'm determined to stay British, but it's difficult when I'm around people with American accents. I do find myself slipping back into an American accent quite easily."

For their role as Ellie, Ramsey has been nominated for a heap of awards, including Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series at the Primetime Emmys and the Screen Actors Guild's Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series.

Though Ramsey was nominated in the Female Actor categories, they announced themselves as non-binary in 2023, explaining to *Vogue*, "I had a lot of anxiety around pronouns. When *The Last Of Us* first came out, I was like, 'Everyone just calls me 'she' because I look like a 'she' to you, so it's fine.' But now I'm able to vocalise it more, being called 'they' is the most truthful thing for me. That's who I am the most."

As successful and celebrated as Bella Ramsey is now, we can't help thinking they're only at the beginning of their journey. An Oscar surely can't be far away… ■

Instagram: @bellaramsey

THEY HAVE STARRED ALONGSIDE BILLIE PIPER IN TWO FILMS – 2018'S *TWO FOR JOY* AND 2022'S *CATHERINE CALLED BIRDY.*

BELLA HAS BEEN VEGAN FOR SEVERAL YEARS: "I'M VEGAN PRIMARILY BECAUSE I LOVE ANIMALS. BUT I ALSO, LIKE MOST OF US, CARE ABOUT THE PLANET. THE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF GOING VEGAN ARE SO SIGNIFICANT."

IN 2018 RAMSEY VOICED THE CHARACTER FREYA IN THE VIDEO GAME *DOCTOR WHO INFINITY.*

THE ACTOR IS PASSIONATE ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, TELLING *THE GUARDIAN* THAT "GRETA THUNBERG IS MY HERO."

BELLA VOICES THE CHARACTER OF MOLLY IN THE 2023 FILM *CHICKEN RUN: DAWN OF THE NUGGET.*

AFTER BELLA FOUND OUT THEY'D LANDED A ROLE IN *GAME OF THRONES* THEY HAD TO KEEP THE NEWS SECRET FOR AN ENTIRE YEAR UNTIL THE SEASON AIRED.

FEATURE BY STEVE O'BRIEN; IMAGES: GETTY

EPISODE 1

WHEN YOU'RE LOST IN THE DARKNESS

THE LAST OF US' DEBUT WAS BROADCAST TO RAVE REVIEWS AND IMPRESSIVE RATINGS, AS STEVE O'BRIEN EXPLAINS...

THE STORY

In 2003, as a parasitic fungal outbreak erupts around the world, Joel Miller attempts to escape the chaos with his family, only for his daughter to be shot and killed. Twenty years later, Joel and his partner Tess fight to survive under a totalitarian regime, while the insurgent Fireflies harbour a teenage girl, Ellie, who appears immune to the virus. Later, Joel and Tess are tasked with smuggling the girl out of the quarantine zone and to the Massachusetts State House in exchange for supplies.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

At 81 minutes, *The Last Of Us'* debut boasts the longest running time of any first season episode, partially because the story was scripted as two episodes. As planned, the opening episode would have climaxed shortly after the jump to present day, but HBO executive Casey Bloys believed that there wasn't enough to compel viewers to return, and suggested combining the first two instalments.

"Casey said, 'Hey, look, I've watched the first two episodes,'" showrunner Craig Mazin explained to *Variety*, "'and my audience gut is telling me we should turn this into one big one, because the ending of what was going to be the second episode is such a great ending, it will drive people forward.'"

The episode was directed by Mazin, though it had originally been earmarked for Johan Renck, the writer's collaborator on the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*. Renck was forced to drop out due to scheduling conflicts, and was replaced in January 2021 by Kantemir Balagov (*Closeness*, *Beanpole*). Leaving the production mid-way through filming due to "creative differences", Balagov was replaced by Mazin, but later claimed on Twitter that "40% of the first 40 minutes" of episode one was his work.

As broadcast, the episode opens with a scene set on a TV talk show in 1968. With Scottish actor John

THE INFO

Broadcast: 15 January 2023
Writers: Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann
Director: Craig Mazin

GUEST CAST

Anna Torv as Tess
Gabriel Luna as Tommy
Nico Parker as Sarah
John Hannah as Dr Neuman
Merle Dandridge as Marlene
Josh Brener as Murray
Christopher Heyerdahl as Schoenheiss
Brad Leland as Mr Adler
Marcia Bennett as Mrs Adler
Brendan Fletcher as Robert
Jerry Wasserman as Abe

FAST FACT
THE EPISODE WON OUTSTANDING SOUND MIXING AND SOUND EDITING AT THE 75TH PRIMETIME CREATIVE ARTS EMMY AWARDS IN 2023.

Hannah (*Four Weddings And A Funeral*) guesting as an epidemiologist, it sets the scene for the premise of *The Last Of Us* as he warns the studio audience of the grave threat posed by fungi due to the lack of preventative treatment or cure. The original plan to start the episode with a clip from a David Attenborough-like natural history series, but Mazin decided, "it was interesting, but not necessarily compelling." Druckmann agreed, telling *The Last Of Us Podcast*, "It was kinda boring."

GOOFS

The song playing in the background of the Lone Star Watch & Jewelry shop is Jad Mhanna's *I Can't Believe You're Back*, which was released in 2018, 15 years after the scene is set.

In the 2003 sequence, within the collection of DVDs at the Adler house, are copies of *Murderball*, *Fame* and *The Boxtrolls*, which were released in 2005, 2009 and 2014, respectively.

Fans of the game will recognise much in this episode, but one critical difference was the programme-makers' decision to alter the date of the outbreak from 2013 to 2003, to allow the 20-year time jump to take us up to (an alternative version of) the present day (the game's 'present day is 2033).

In the broadcast version, the 2003 section takes up 35 minutes of the episode. For newcomers, that first half hour appears as though it's setting up the series' three main characters, and so casting was crucial for these scenes. As Tommy, Joel's brother, the producers cast *Terminator: Dark Fate* star Gabriel Luna, who told *The Hollywood Reporter* about his approach to the role: "Having been created 10 years ago, [Tommy] has a history with the fans and a place in the gaming space, character-wise. So you approach it somewhat like a biopic about a person that exists in life. I tried to absorb [from the games] what I believed to be important and what the gamers are going to hope for in a true translation of the game."

One of the episode's standout sequences is the scene in the car, as Joel, Tommy and Sarah flee their home town of Austin. Scripted as one take, it was filmed at night across four weeks in Fort Macleod, Canada using hundreds of extras. A dune buggy was mounted on the top of the jeep, controlled by a stunt driver, while cinematographer Ksenia Sereda was stationed in the backseat. The cast and crew would rehearse late evening for two hours and then shoot until just before dawn.

"It was so wild," Pedro Pascal told *Entertainment Weekly*. "It was like the entire town of Fort Macleod was our set. It was unbelievable. Then you put a camera in the car and we drive through a real staging that is an entire town with people pouring out of a movie theatre and cars almost hitting us and mobs of infected chasing people. The greatest opportunity of playing make-believe I've ever had."

When y
FEDRA
FEDERAL DISASTER RESPONSE AGENCY
INCIDENT SECURITY FORCE
SECURE AREA
HAVE YOUR HEALTH SCREENING PASS ON HAND AT ALL TIMES

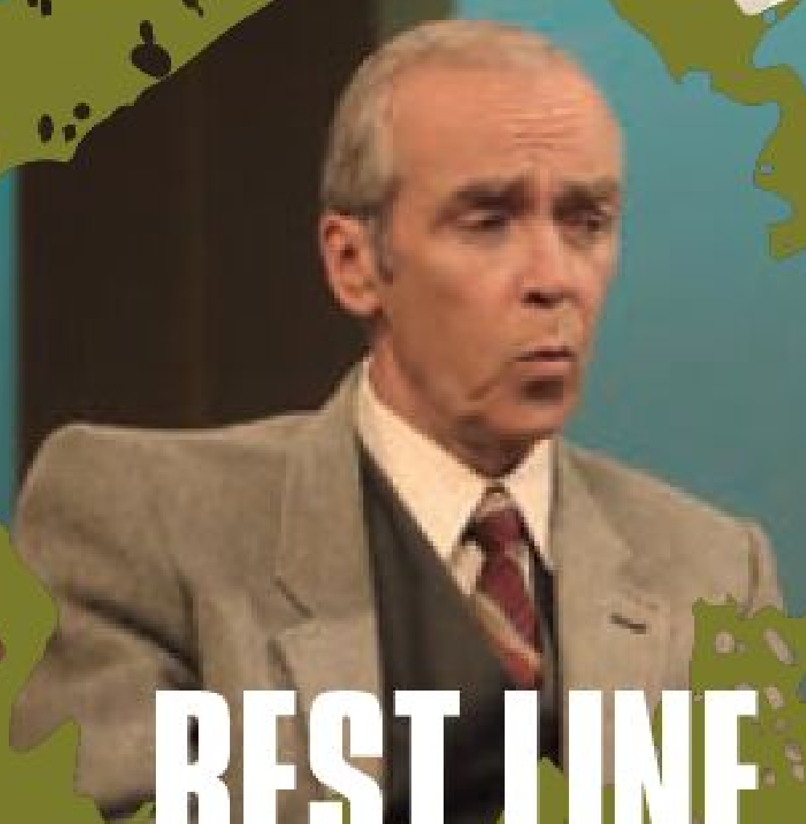
FAST FACT
THE EPISODE BEGINS ON 26 SEPTEMBER 2003, EXACTLY ONE DAY AFTER THE BIRTH OF BELLA RAMSEY

STAR TURN

NICO PARKER AS SARAH

Though Joel's daughter Sarah only appears in the first 35 minutes of the first episode, her casting was critical. This is someone that viewers are led to think will be a recurring character and so she had to be cast with precision. Nico Parker makes an immediate impression, showing great chemistry with Pedro Pascal – so much so that her death just over half an hour in is a real gut punch. Parker, now 20, is the daughter of British actor Thandiwe Newton and can be seen later this year in Disney's live-action remake of *How To Train Your Dragon*.

ou're lost in the darkness
look for the light
DANGER
NO ENTRY
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY



BEST LINE

"One gene mutates and an ascomycete, candida, ergot, cordyceps, aspergillus, any one of them could become capable of burrowing into our brains and taking control not of millions of us, but billions of us. Billions of puppets with poisoned minds permanently fixed on one unifying goal: to spread the infection to every last human alive by any means necessary. And there are no treatments for this. No preventatives, no cures. They don't exist. It's not even possible to make them."

Dr Neuman delivers a dire warning for the future

FAST FACT

THE FINAL SCENE AND CREDITS FEATURE DEPECHE MODE'S 1987 SONG *NEVER LET ME DOWN AGAIN*. THE TRACK SAW A SURGE IN STREAMS FOLLOWING THE EPISODE'S AIRING.

When the story time-jumps to 2023, another principal character is introduced in the form of Joel's partner Tess. Australian actor Anna Torv (*Mindhunter*, *The Newsreader*) explained to *Looper* how important staying faithful to the game was to her: "With any good story and well-drawn character, you'll end up sticking pretty close to it, because that's the story and that's who you're playing. That stuff, it's based on the

game. The story is the same. The character is the same. Different actors are coming in to do different jobs, but ultimately, Tess is Tess."

Dropping on HBO Max on 15 January 2023, *When You're Lost In The Darkness* won a US audience of 4.7 million, making it the second-largest debut for HBO since 2010, behind *Game Of Thrones* spin-off *House Of The Dragon*. Two days later, that figure had ballooned to over 10 million, and then 18 million after a week. Within two months of premiering, 40 million viewers had watched the episode. The arrival of the TV series caused a spike in sales of the game, too – in the UK *The Last Of Us Remastered*'s sales shot up by 322% over the previous week and *The Last Of Us Part I* by 238%, both re-entering the games charts as a result.

EASTER EGGS

In the episode, Tommy refers to the burning farmhouse as "Jimmy's place". This is a reference to Jimmy Cooper, the Millers' infected neighbour from the game who was replaced by the Adlers for TV.

The first shot of Sarah's room is of her curtains, mirroring the menu screen of the original game.

When Sarah is shot, her scream is taken from the video game.

The DVD Sarah borrows from her neighbours, and which she later watches with her dad, is *Curtis And Viper 2*. This fictional film series was originally mentioned in *The Last Of Us Part II*.

When Joel, Ellie and Tess are caught by the soldier outside the quarantine zone, the 'getting spotted' sound effect from the game can be heard.

FAST FACT

MERLE DANDRIDGE, WHO PLAYS MARLENE, THE LEADER OF THE FIREFLIES, VOICED THE CHARACTER IN THE ORIGINAL GAME.

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

FAST FACT
JOHAN RENCK, THE DIRECTOR ORIGINALLY ASSIGNED TO THE EPISODE, USED TO BE A POP STAR IN THE EARLY '90S, GOING BY THE NAME STAKKA BO.

Critics gave the episode a glowing reception. "The casting here is universally brilliant," raved *Forbes*. "Pascal is perfect as Joel, even if the show tones down his violence and makes him a bit more relatable than in the game. We don't get a ton of Ellie yet, but I think Ramsay is perfect as the spunky, opinionated teenager who isn't afraid of speaking her mind." *Total Film* wrote that, "the premiere does the almost miraculous: it expands on the games, and often betters them", while *Den Of Geek* praised it for remaining faithful to its source material: "*The Last Of Us* series isn't just acclaimed for the characters and writing, it also absolutely nails the aesthetic of the games and adapts it to television seamlessly. The earth tones, the rich lighting, the stark levels of saturation, the vegetation and foliage overtaking abandoned buildings and roads – it all feels right." ■

GIVING CREDIT

TWISTING FUNGUS, SPREADING ACROSS THE US, DEVOURING CITIES, DEVOURING PEOPLE… THE OPENING TITLES OF *THE LAST OF US* ARE A ONE-MINUTE LONG DISTILLATION OF THE SERIES' SETUP…

Beginning with a flat mould crawling along a surface, colourful fungus spreads out and along, quickly shooting up into taller stalks, mirroring the way the Cordyceps of the show take over human skyscrapers and cities. Then the single camera shot pulls back, showing lines of light and colour as bioluminescent fungi create a shape evoking a nighttime map of the USA before zooming back down and showing a contour that disturbingly resembles a screaming human face, half-submerged in the ground. Finally, more twisting, growing tendrils create a path and then a clearing in which two figures begin to coalesce – Joel and Ellie.

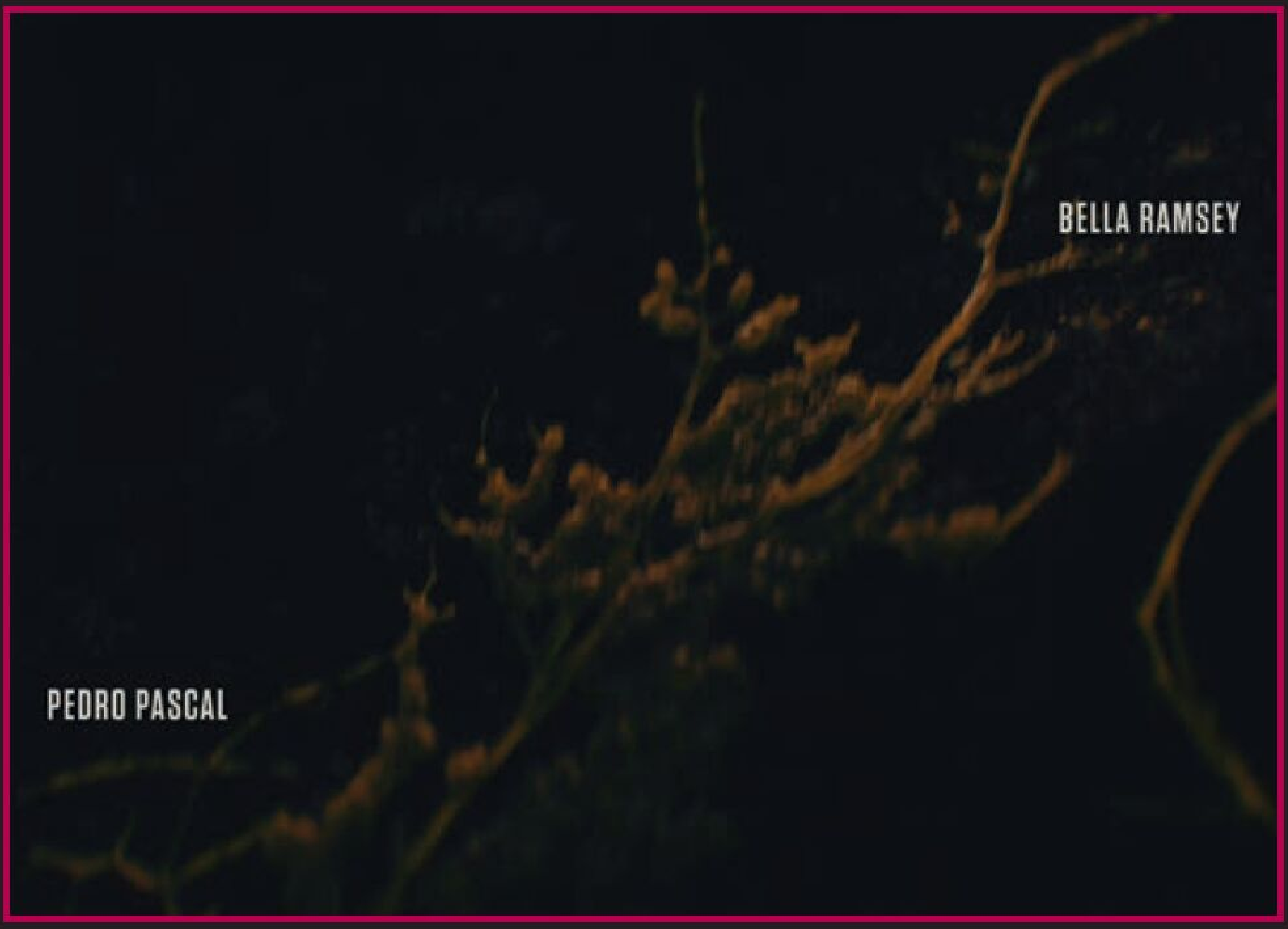
Fans of the game will have recognised the concept as, unusually for a video game, *The Last Of Us* (the game) began with a similar account of the setup. Realised in harsh black and white, these credits showed tendrils of fungi flickering across the screen, as voiceovers set the scene of a military state devastated by the infection.

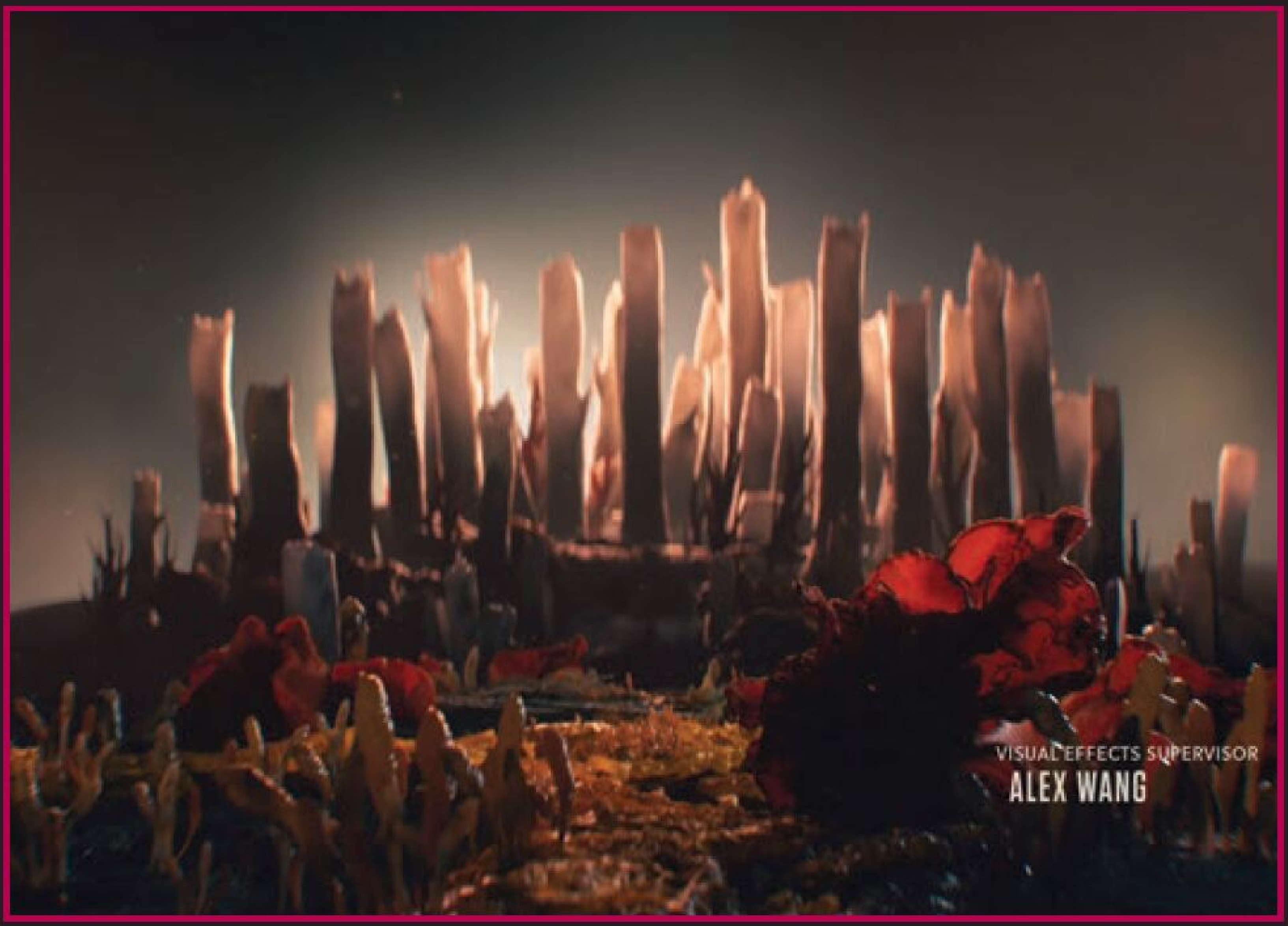
The television credits were created by Elastic – the same design studio responsible for *Game Of Thrones*' and *True Detective*'s famous openings. Acknowledging the original game's titles as "iconic" and "cinematic", Elastic wanted to add more layers, showing a deep dive into fungal behaviour to discover the similarities between human and fungi species.

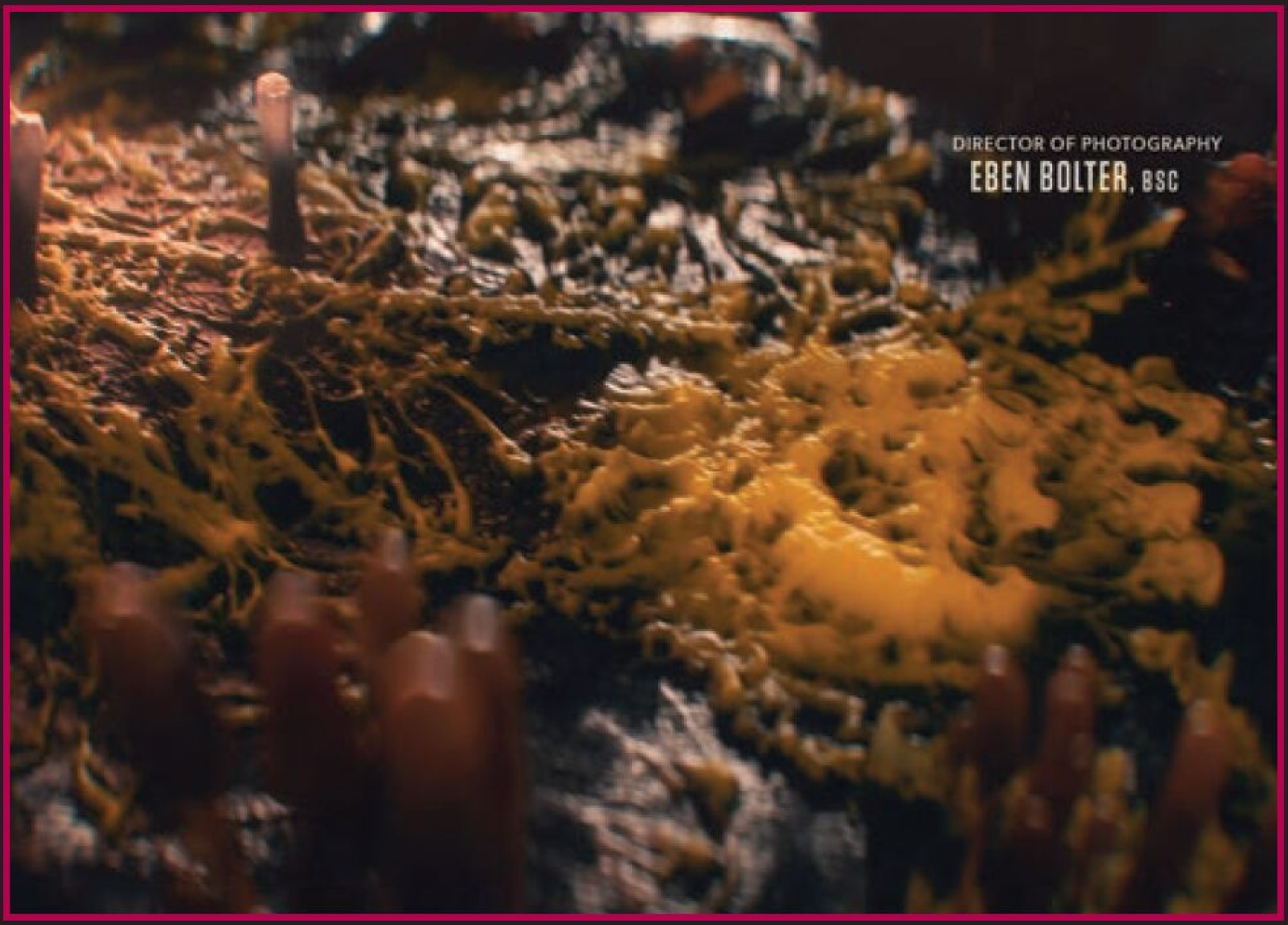
"As humans, we build cities and networks for communication, which is actually very similar to what we find fungi doing in nature," explained Elastic's creative director Nadia Tzuo. "They link with each other, communicate, reproduce and even experience competition and conflict. We thought it was really interesting that all of that is so similar to human behaviour, and that makes it a perfect visual to represent the show."

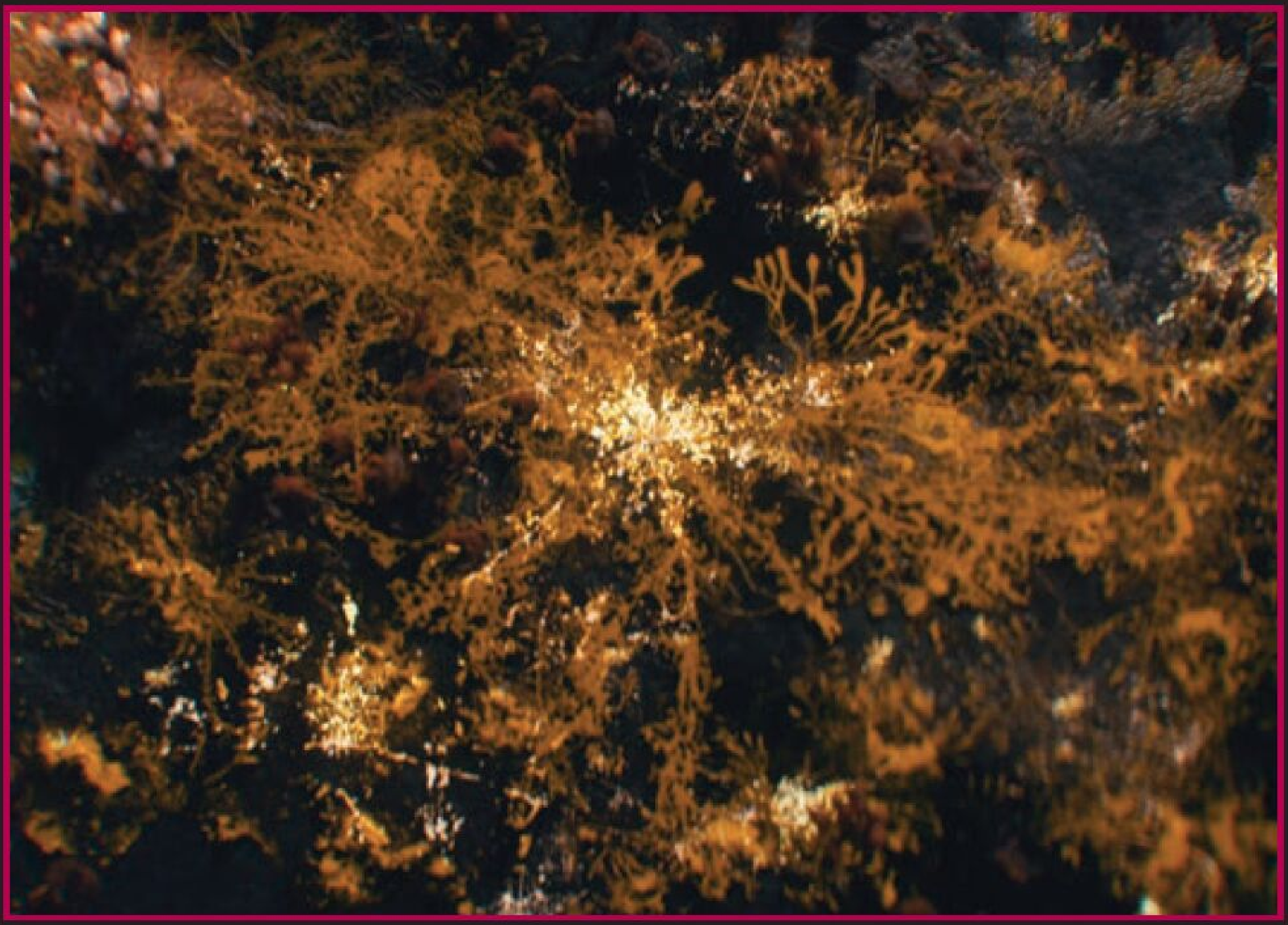
The game's credits are in black and white, but the show added colour, and even bioluminescence to evoke a night-time map of the US, again inspired by the richness of fungus in nature. Executive creative director Andy Hall said the biggest challenge was making that eerie, flesh-creeping growth look convincing, something they overcame with an "extensive study of fungi and seeing how they move and at times infest and overrun, which are strikingly brutal. We just stayed true to those details so we never lost sight of the unforgiving beauty of nature."

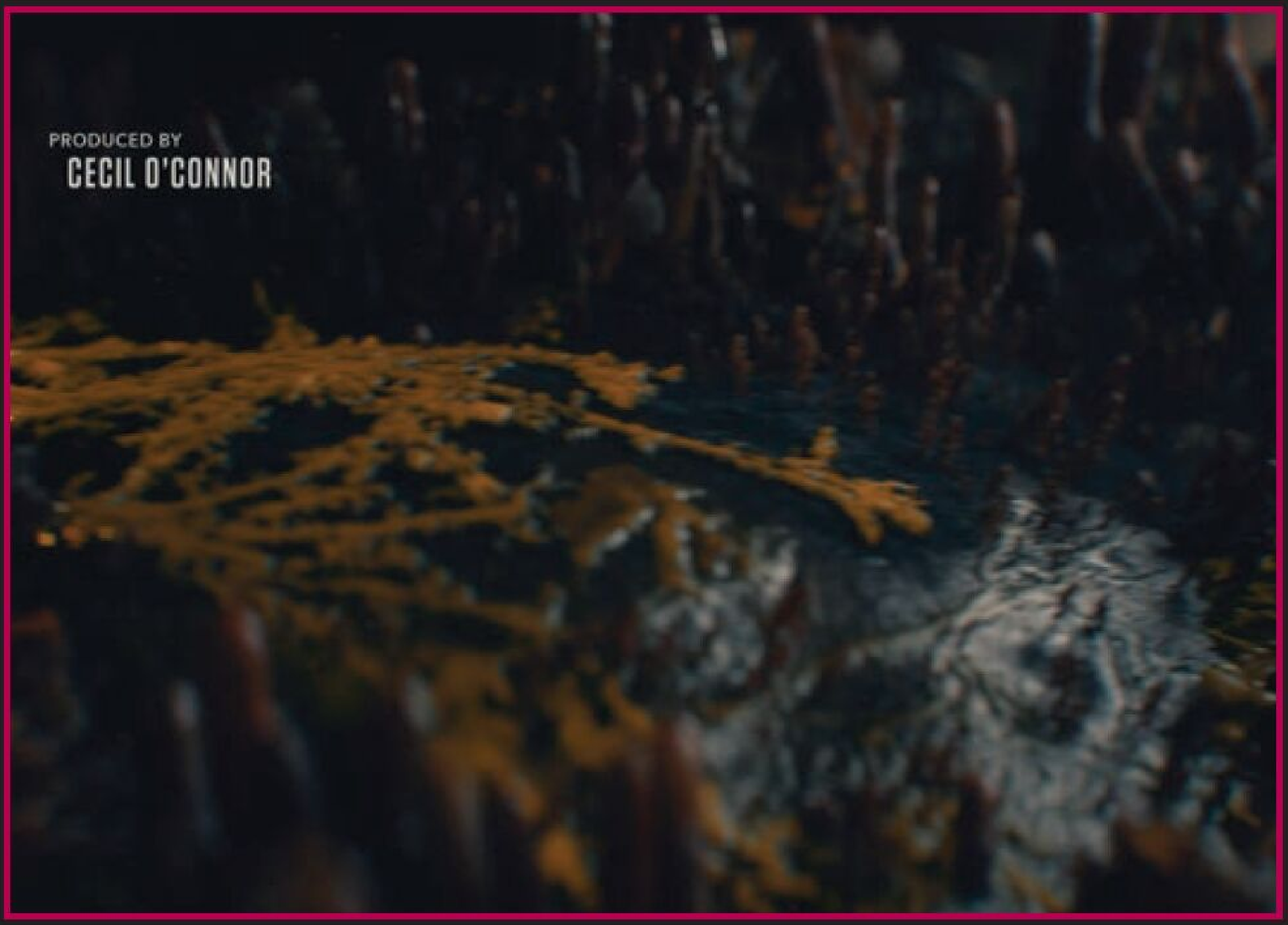
Unforgiving beauty is about right – and it's a beauty we get to appreciate at the start of every episode. ■

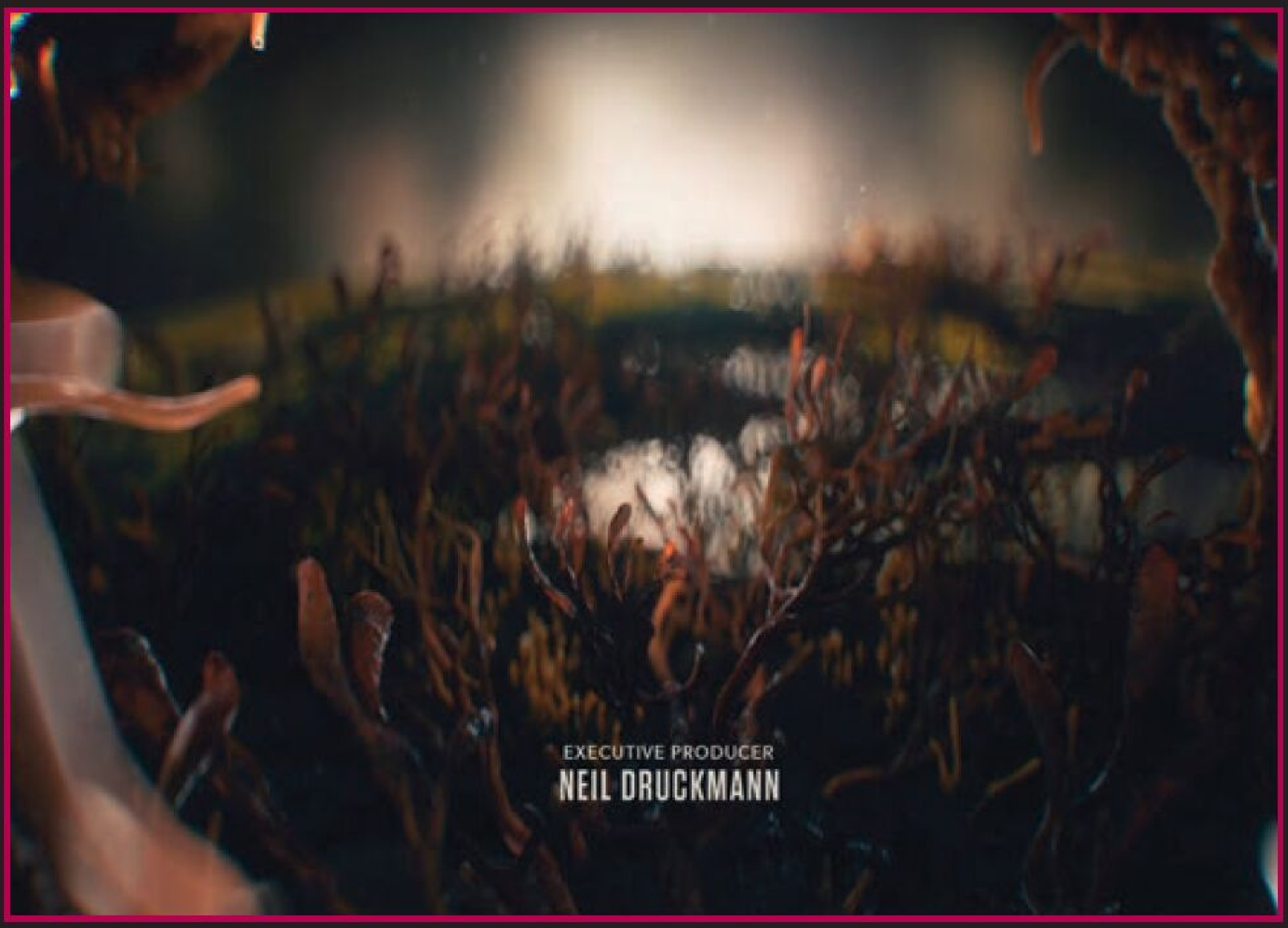









PRODUCED BY
CECIL O'CONNOR


EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
NEIL DRUCKMANN

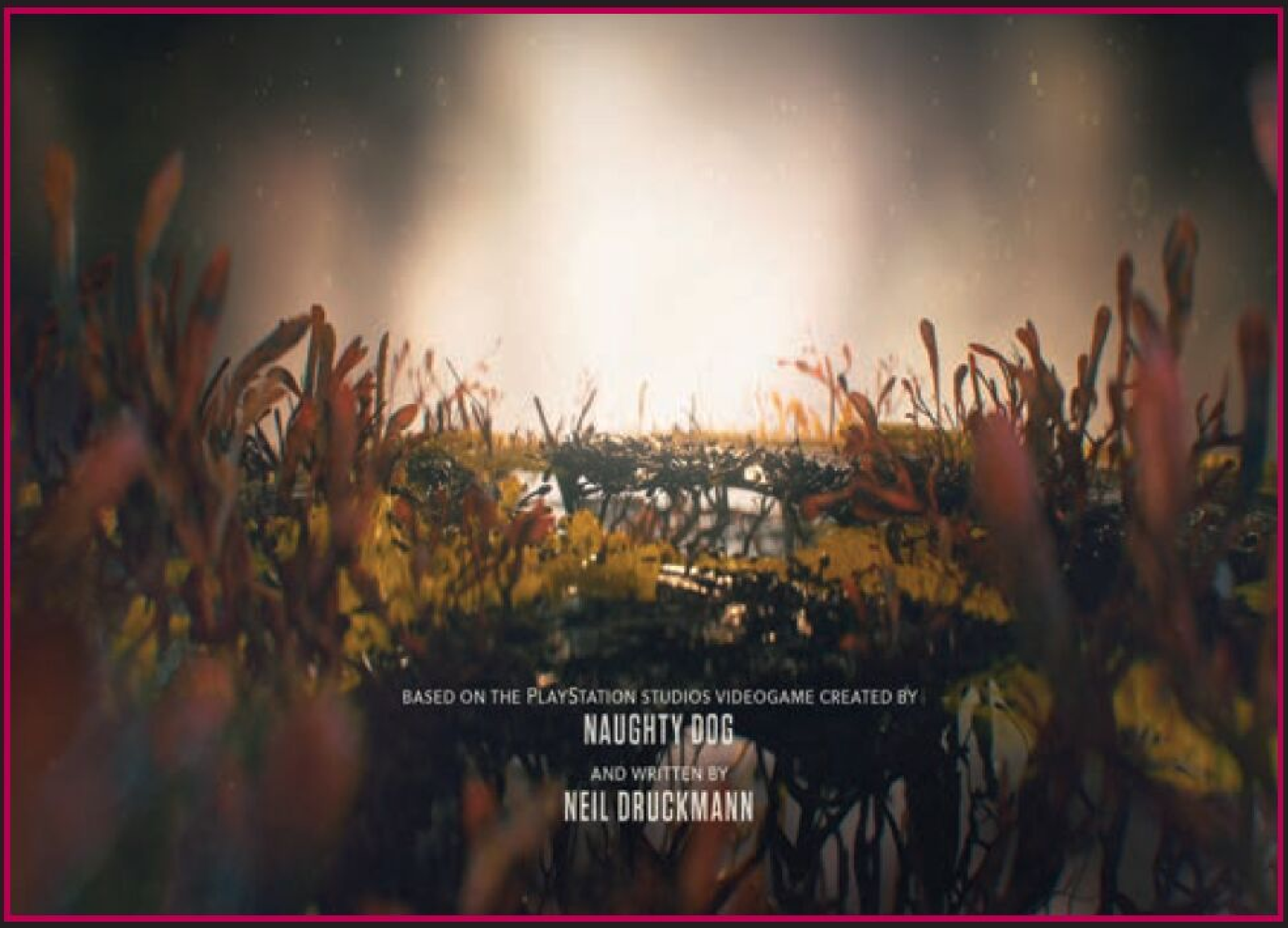
PLAY IT AGAIN, JOEL

Fans of the game may also recognise that twanging theme music. Composed by Argentine musician Gustavo Santaolalla, it's a reprise of his theme for both *The Last Of Us* games.

Santaolalla was chosen by Neil Druckmann and game director Bruce Straley, who began compiling musical inspiration, and quickly realised that he was the composer behind many of their choices. While some at Sony weren't sure he was right for the game, the creators knew that his style was perfect for their story.

Santaolalla is known for his use of the ronroco and it's this that's heard across the titles. An eery, slow-building twang, underscored by a relentless beat, it perfectly sets the scene.

"How could you change the main theme of *The Last Of Us*?" asked Santaolalla when speaking to *Spitfire Audio* in early 2023. "It would have been ridiculous because it is a part of the story."


BASED ON THE PLAYSTATION STUDIOS VIDEOGAME CREATED BY
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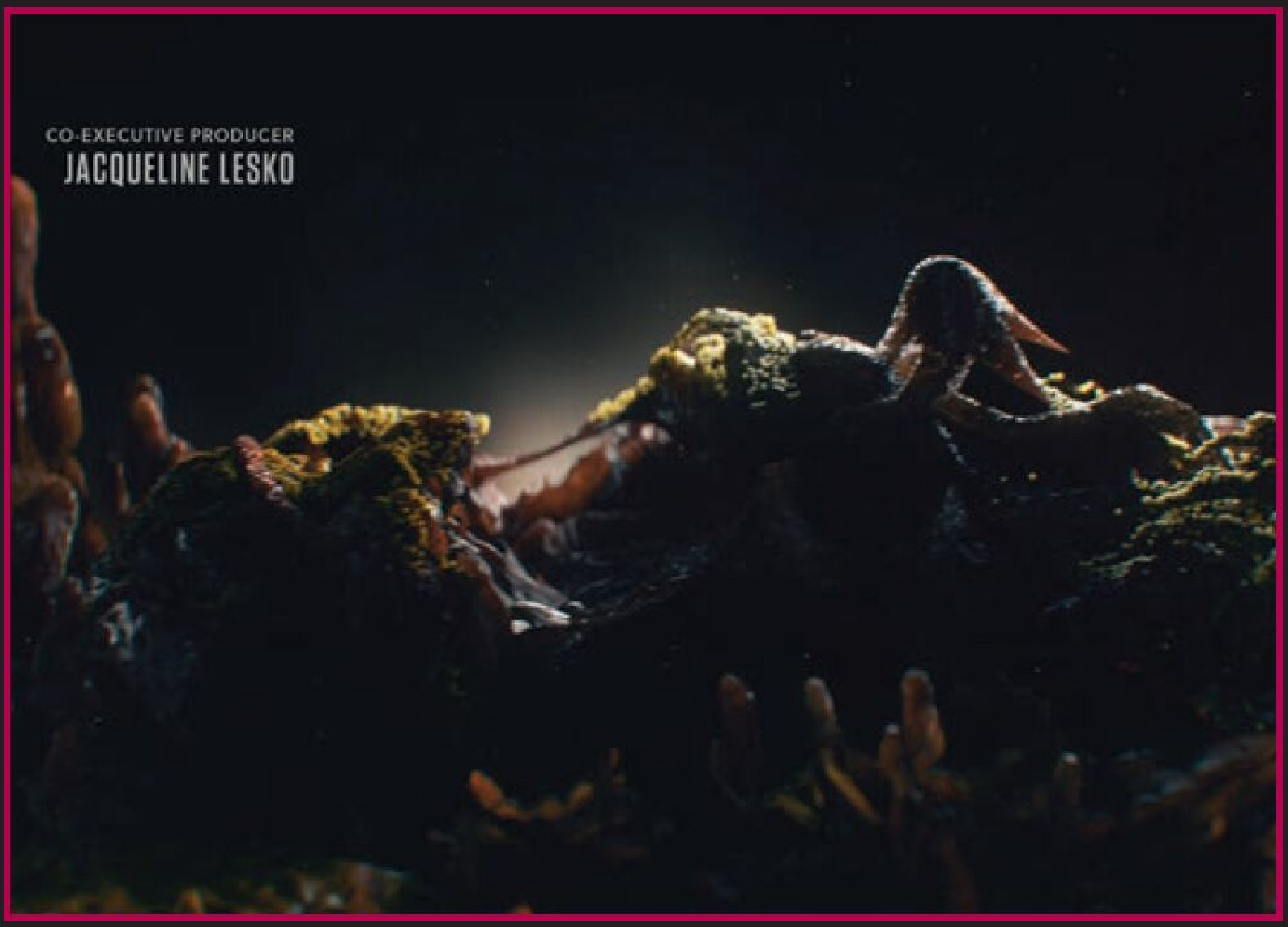
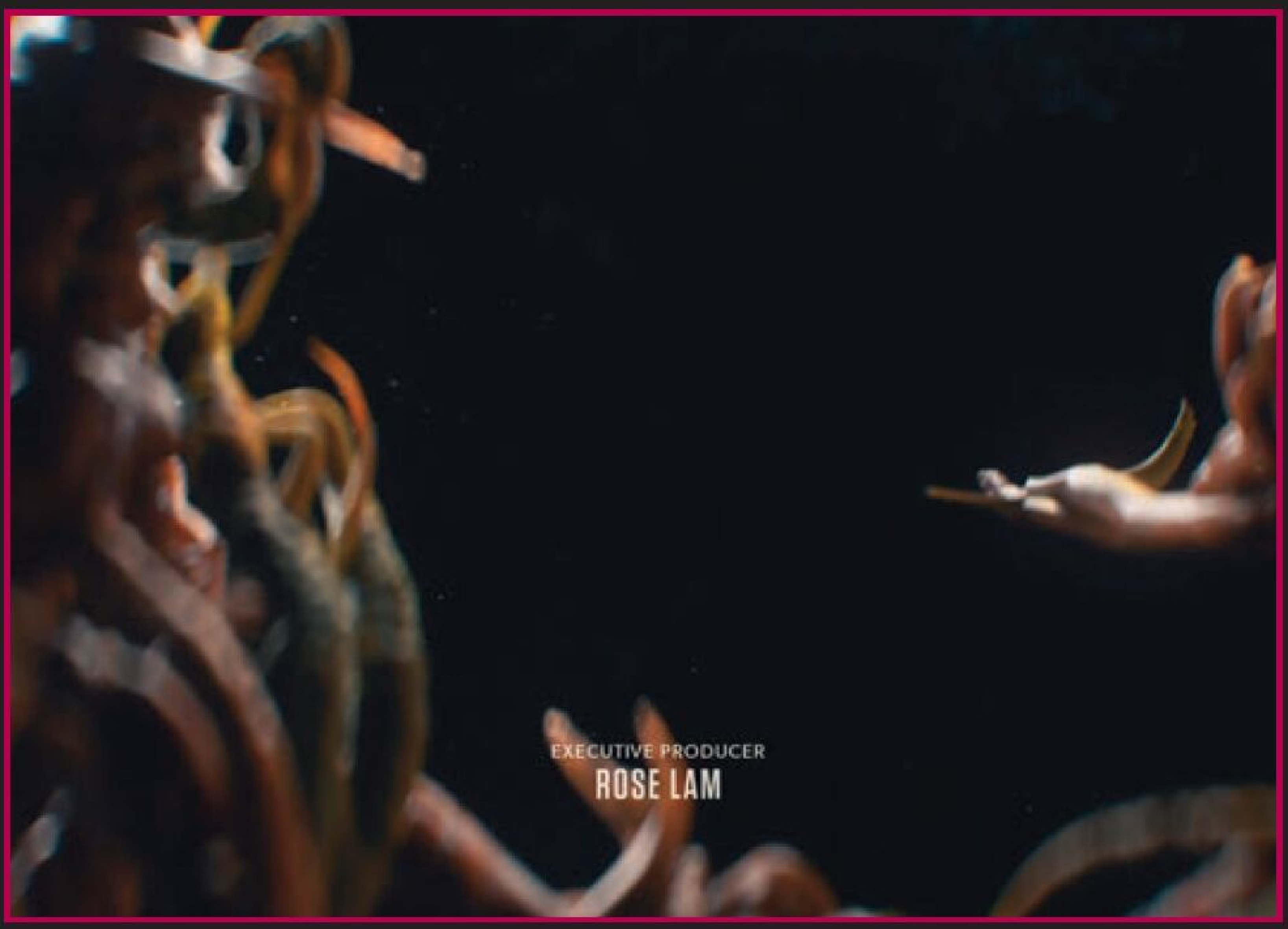
AND WRITTEN BY
NEIL DRUCKMANN


CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
JACQUELINE LESKO


EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
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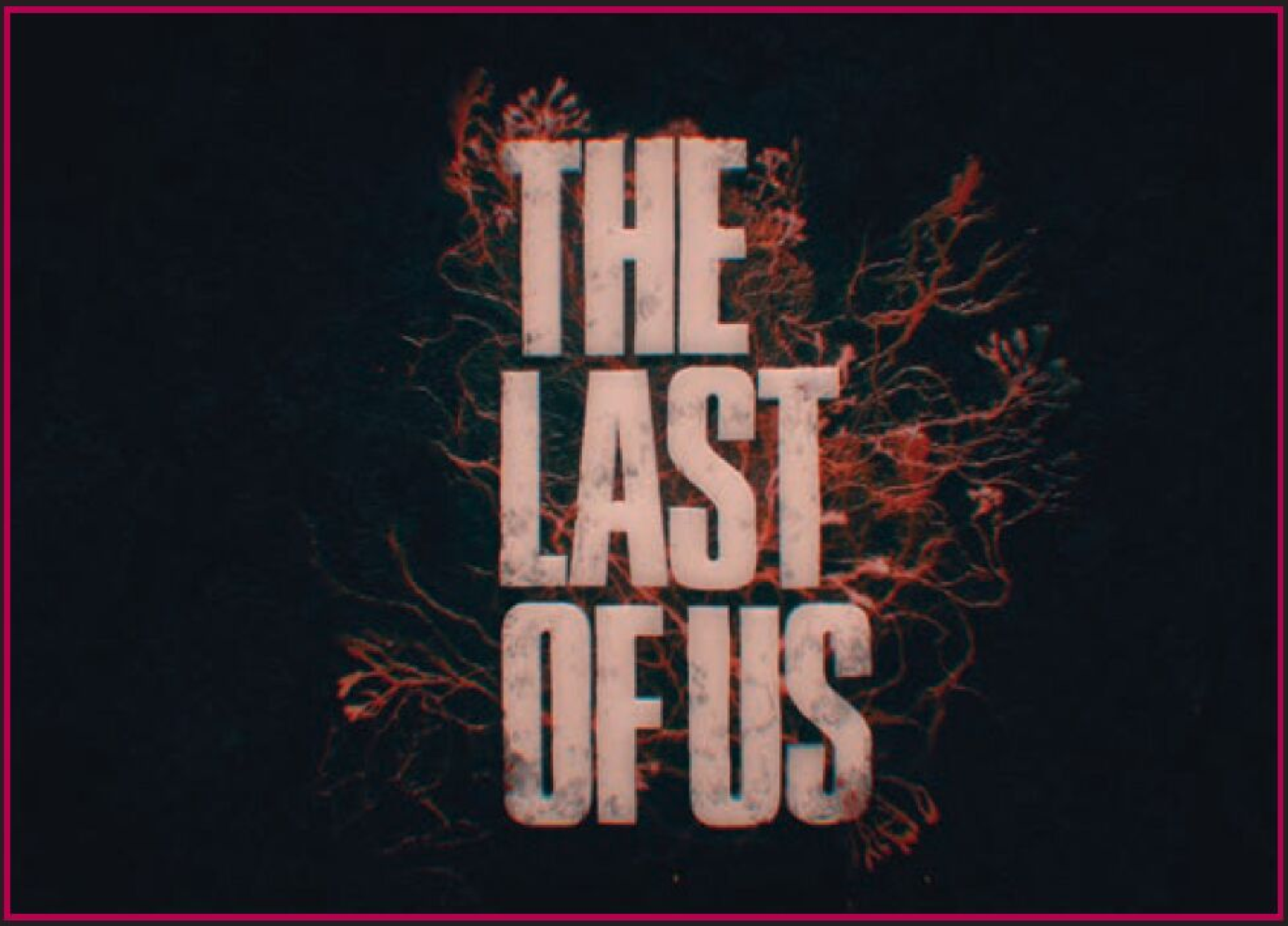
THE LAST OF US

FEATURE BY RHIAN DRINKWATER; IMAGES HBO

MEET THE SHOWRUNNERS

THE LAST OF US WAS BROUGHT TO LIFE FOR TV BY AN ACCLAIMED SCREENWRITER AND ONE OF THE ORIGINAL VIDEO GAME'S CREATORS. ROB LOCKWOOD INTRODUCES THEM…

IMAGES GETTY

CRAIG MAZIN

"HBO'S GOLDEN BOY"

Craig Mazin has had perhaps one of the more improbable career shifts in recent television history. The writer, director and producer is best known these days as the co-showrunner of *The Last Of Us* and for the enthralling true life miniseries *Chernobyl*. Before he took this turn to the dramatic, however, he was known as a writer of comedy movies, including sequels to *Scary Movie* and *The Hangover*.

Born in Brooklyn in 1971, Mazin's entertainment career began in marketing at Walt Disney Pictures in the '90s, though it wasn't long before he made his screenwriting intentions known. Teaming up with his friend Greg Erb (who he had met as a student at Princeton, a time that famously also saw Mazin share a room with controversial US politician Ted Cruz), the pair signed a two-picture deal with Dimension, which led them write the screenplays for 1997's *RocketMan* and 1998's *Senseless*.

Two years later Mazin moved into directing, though his career in this field to date spans just two feature films. 2000's *The Specials* was a superhero comedy that's perhaps most notable nowadays for having been scripted by James Gunn, the writer and director behind Marvel's *Guardians Of The Galaxy* movies. The film was not a hit, but has gained something of a cult following over the years.

Mazin quickly returned to screenwriting, with *Scary Movie 3* (co-written with Pat Proft) releasing in 2003. The film was the second sequel to a low budget – and arguably even lower brow – horror spoof, but it did well enough to ensure a fourth film, which Mazin, Proft and Jim Abrahams also wrote. *Superhero Movie*, an utterly dismal comic book parody, followed in 2008, but Mazin soon found himself on surer footing co-writing *The Hangover Part II* and *Part III* with director Todd Phillips, another creative who took an improbable mid-career tone shift with 2019's bleak *Joker*.

It was with 2019's *Chernobyl*, however, that Mazin's career stepped up by several notches. Mazin created this five-episode retelling of 1986's Chernobyl nuclear disaster in northern Ukraine and wrote every episode himself. The show, which was directed by Johan Renck, became an instant critical hit, winning the Best Limited Series or Television Film award at the Golden Globes and Outstanding Limited Series at the Primetime Emmy Awards. Alternately thrilling and harrowing, this was a mature work that worked as both a compelling drama and a largely accurate document of the world's worst nuclear accident. The series reinvented Mazin's career almost overnight and certainly paved the way for his work adapting *The Last Of Us* just a couple of years later.

In the aftermath of *Chernobyl*'s success, Mazin began considering his future projects. Already a fan of *The Last Of Us* game, he was disappointed to learn that the rights were tied up in a planned movie adaptation. A couple of years later, however, and the situation was very different. He was introduced to Neil Druckmann in 2019 and, a week later, the duo pitched the show to HBO. The rest, as they say, is history.

NEIL DRUCKMANN

"THE VIDEO GAME MAESTRO"

The Last Of Us co-showrunner Neil Druckmann doesn't come from a TV background, but perhaps, you could argue, that's part of the reason for *The Last Of Us* TV show's success. As someone who has worked in the video games industry for more than 20 years, and as one of the directors of the original title, he was perfectly placed to ensure the adaptation was faithful to the source material.

Born in Tel Aviv, Israel in 1978, the young Druckmann was a fan of comic books and video games from a young age – it was, in part, the latter that helped him learn to speak English. He moved with his family to the United States in 1989, making a home in Miami, Florida. When it came time to study Druckmann enrolled in a criminology major at Florida State University, but quickly shifted his attention to computer science. "At some point, I took a programming class, and it came easy to me, and then it just clicked, 'Wait, this is what people do to make video games!'" he later said to *Creative Screenwriting* magazine.

He then studied at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh. It was here that he had the first germ of an idea that would eventually become *The Last Of Us*, when *Night Of The Living Dead* director and godfather of the modern zombie movie George Romero judged a competition to come up with a zombie narrative for a game. Druckmann pitched a story about a man who has lost his daughter and a young girl with no father who are forced to team up. "He didn't like it," Druckmann told *The Hollywood Reporter* of Romero's reaction. "He picked something else."

After his studies, Druckmann managed to wangle his way into an internship at video games developer Naughty Dog, then best known for the *Jak And Daxter* franchise. He worked on localisation tools and gameplay programming for *Jak 3* and was offered a full-time job at the end of his internship. Now ensconced within Naughty Dog, Druckmann quickly rose through the ranks at the company, becoming a programmer and then a video game designer starting with 2007's *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, the first instalment in what became a major video games franchise.

Druckmann was next assigned to work on a new *Jak And Daxter* game, but as it progressed, the team started to have misgivings. "We found the ideas we were passionate about were kind of getting away from what *Jak And Daxter* was," he told *GameSpot*. "We were questioning, 'Are we doing this for marketing reasons? Naming something *Jak And Daxter*, when it's not really *Jak And Daxter*?" Instead, Druckmann returned to the idea that George Romero had rejected. *The Last Of Us* was released in 2013 to instant critical and commercial acclaim. A sequel was released in 2020 and was another smash hit, though it met with a more muted critical reception. Still, the strength of the games and the fact that the licence had become available after an aborted attempt by Screen Gems to make a movie had fallen through, meant that the time was right for HBO to swoop in and make the TV show we're all celebrating today. ■

HBO ORIGINAL
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THE LAST OF US
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Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin (on left) with cast and crew in 2023.

WATCH PARTY

WHEN YOU'RE LOST IN THE DARKNESS

PIZZAS HAVE BEEN BOUGHT, BEERS, WINE AND ORANGE JUICES HAVE BEEN POURED, AND PHONES HAVE BEEN SWITCHED OFF. OUR SOFA WATCH TEAM IS ABOUT TO EMBARK ON A GROUP VIEWING OF *THE LAST OF US'* CLASSIC DEBUT EPISODE…

> "WITH THE BEST WILL IN THE WORLD, PEDRO PASCAL DOES NOT LOOK 36 HERE"

It's 15 January 2025 and to mark the second anniversary of *The Last Of Us'* first episode, we've gathered together a few fans plus a series newbie for a group viewing of *When You're Lost In The Darkness*.

This debut episode introduced viewers to the premise behind *The Last Of Us*, showing, first-off, how the mass fungal infection took hold, before a 20-year time-jump into a drastically different future – a world in which Cordyceps is still raging and where America is ruled by the militaristic Federal Disaster Response Agency (otherwise known as FEDRA).

The episode begins, however, in 1968, with a scene set on a TV talk show, where John Hannah's (yes, him – the "Stop all the clocks" one from *Four Weddings And A Funeral*) Dr Neuman is cautioning the studio audience about a fungal threat to humanity.

Steve: "This is such a bold way to start the show, to feature two men just talking. It could be boring, but it's so compelling, especially as there's an ominous warning there about climate change."

After the titles, we're suddenly in 2003 – 26 September, to be precise. The Day The World Changed.

Lizz: "The year I was born. So if this was real I'd have no memory of life before the outbreak."

Here, in Austin, Texas, we're introduced to Joel, plus his 14-year-old daughter Sarah and brother Tommy. "How old are you?" Sarah asks her dad at the breakfast table. "Thirty-six," he replies.

Steve: "With the best will in the world, Pedro Pascal does not look 36 here."

Willow: "He doesn't look 36, but he is still attractive. Not as much as he was in *Buffy*, though."

Miles: "Look, he's just pushing his food around the plate. People on TV never put food in their mouth."

Steve: "Probably a nightmare for continuity. Plus it would wither under studio lights."

Sarah displays a mouthful of chewed egg.

Britt: "You were saying, Miles?"

Miles: "Shut up."

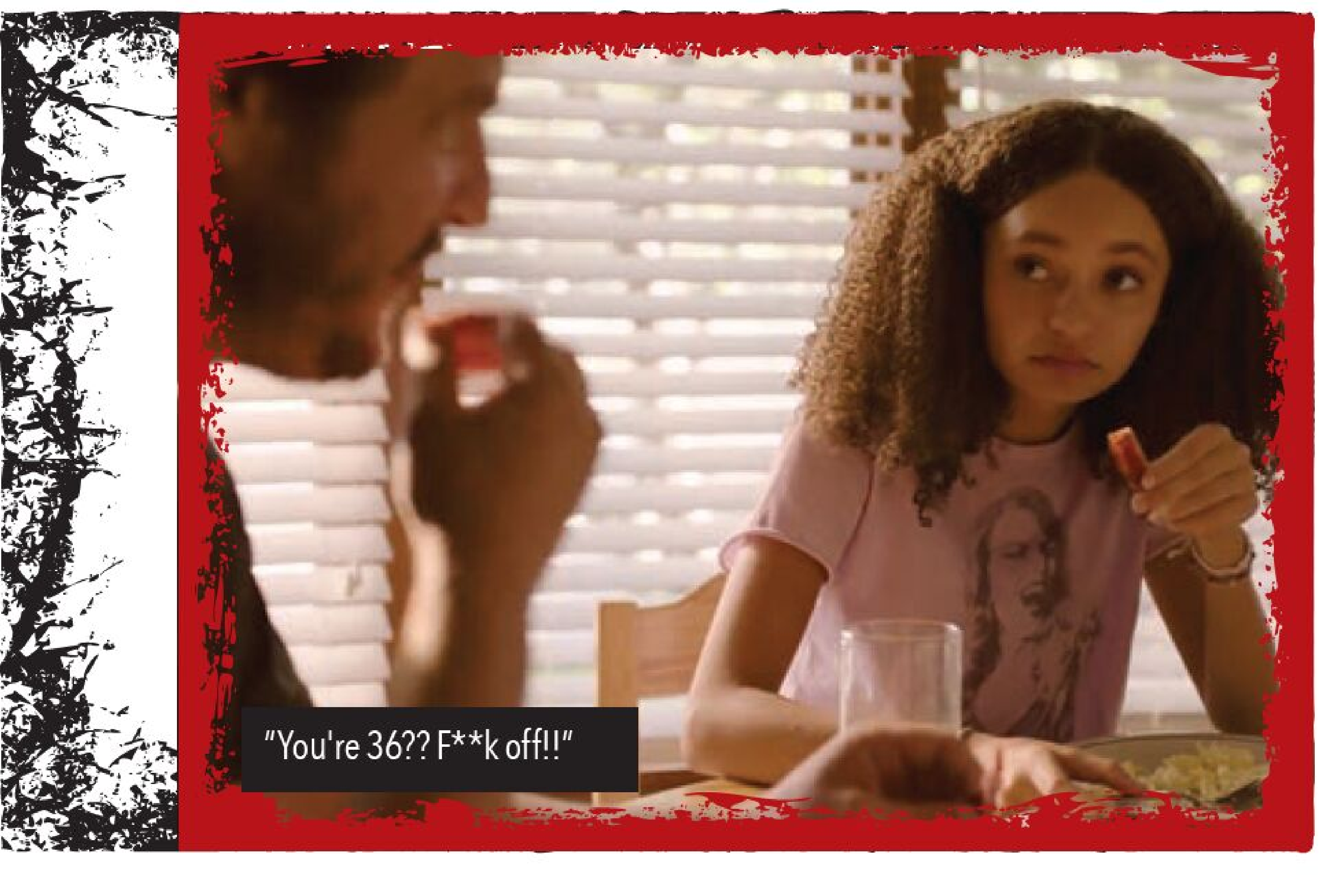
Lizz suddenly spots that Sarah's styling makes her look like one of her noughties favourites: "She's like a grungy Dora the Explorer!"

Later, Sarah visits her neighbour and finds that the old lady has, well, gone loco and bitten a chunk out of her husband's neck. Not only that, but something is sprouting from her mouth.

Willow: "Oh my god, what's that? Is that hair?!"

Miles: "No, it's fungi."

Willow: "Oh, that's alright then."


"You're 36?? F**k off!!"

Later, it's clear something very bad is happening across the city, maybe even the world, and so Joel, Sarah and Tommy make a break for it.

Steve: "This is the moment when you realise this is a seriously expensive series. It's all plane crashes and explosions and mass panic. Imagine this being done on a BBC budget."

Miles: "Yeah, a plum-voiced radio broadcast explaining all the amazing stuff we don't get to see, being listened to by a cockney who exclaims, 'Blimey, I just shit me trousers!' Maybe."

After their car breaks down outside of Austin, Joel and Sarah encounter a soldier and Sarah is fatally wounded. It's the episode's first big shock moment and it's taken Willow by surprise.

Willow: "Oh, so hold on, she's not a main character then? Wow."

Suddenly, we're in 2023, in Boston, and the world looks very different.

MILES
WILLOW
STEVE
BRITT

And here's Joel, looking not a lot older, except for a few flecks of gray in his hair ("Okay, he's a more convincing 56," says Britt). This is a proper dystopia – military personnel on the ground, people throwing dead bodies onto bonfires, public hangings, a new album from Nickelback (okay, we've made that one up)...

Britt: "This is what I love about the show. Where *The Walking Dead* is mostly about the zombie threat, this is more about what happens to a society and to a world after a disaster, how do you build it back up again? It's quite *A Handmaid's Tale*, isn't it."

Miles: "I don't like that, it's just *too* depressing. This is about the level of dystopia I'm comfortable with."

We're introduced to Tess, who we soon discover is Joel's smuggling partner in 2023, battered and bruised.

Steve: "Not so much here, but in real life, Anna Torv is the spitting image of Cate Blanchett. Go on, check them out on Google – both Australian too!"

Rest of the group: "Um..."

Next up, it's Ellie. When we first meet *The Last Of Us*' co-lead character she's chained up, a prisoner of the insurgent Fireflies, but for what reason we don't yet know.

With her first ever line, it's clear that Ellie is one of the series' spunkiest and funniest characters. "Count slowly and clearly," a Firefly tells her. "One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Fuck. You," the teenager replies, before flicking the finger to her captor.

Willow: "She's brilliant. I'd want her for my bestie if I was in this."

Lizz: "Bella Ramsey does such a good American accent. You'd never guess they were from Nottinghamshire."

Britt: "Do you think their former castmates on *The Worst Witch* are watching them on this, seething with professional jealousy?"

Joel visits a man named Abe, who it turns out is in contact with Tommy, whom Joel hasn't heard from in a while. He tells Joel his brother is in Wyoming.

Showing off a bigger budget than they'd get on the BBC...

"THIS IS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO A SOCIETY AND TO A WORLD AFTER A DISASTER"

Miles: "When I first saw this, I totally thought that was Jon Hamm."

Steve: "He looks less like Jon Hamm than Anna Torv does Cate Blanchett."

Britt: "Let it go, Steve."

Miles: "Bet Jon Hamm would eat his breakfast food."

It's a tough world now. Though not quite as tough as Gilead.

Britt: "Let it go, Miles."
Willow: "So does Pedro Pascal look like the Joel of the video game?"
Miles: "A bit. He's a bit more generic rugged American in the game. A bit more *Yellowstone*."

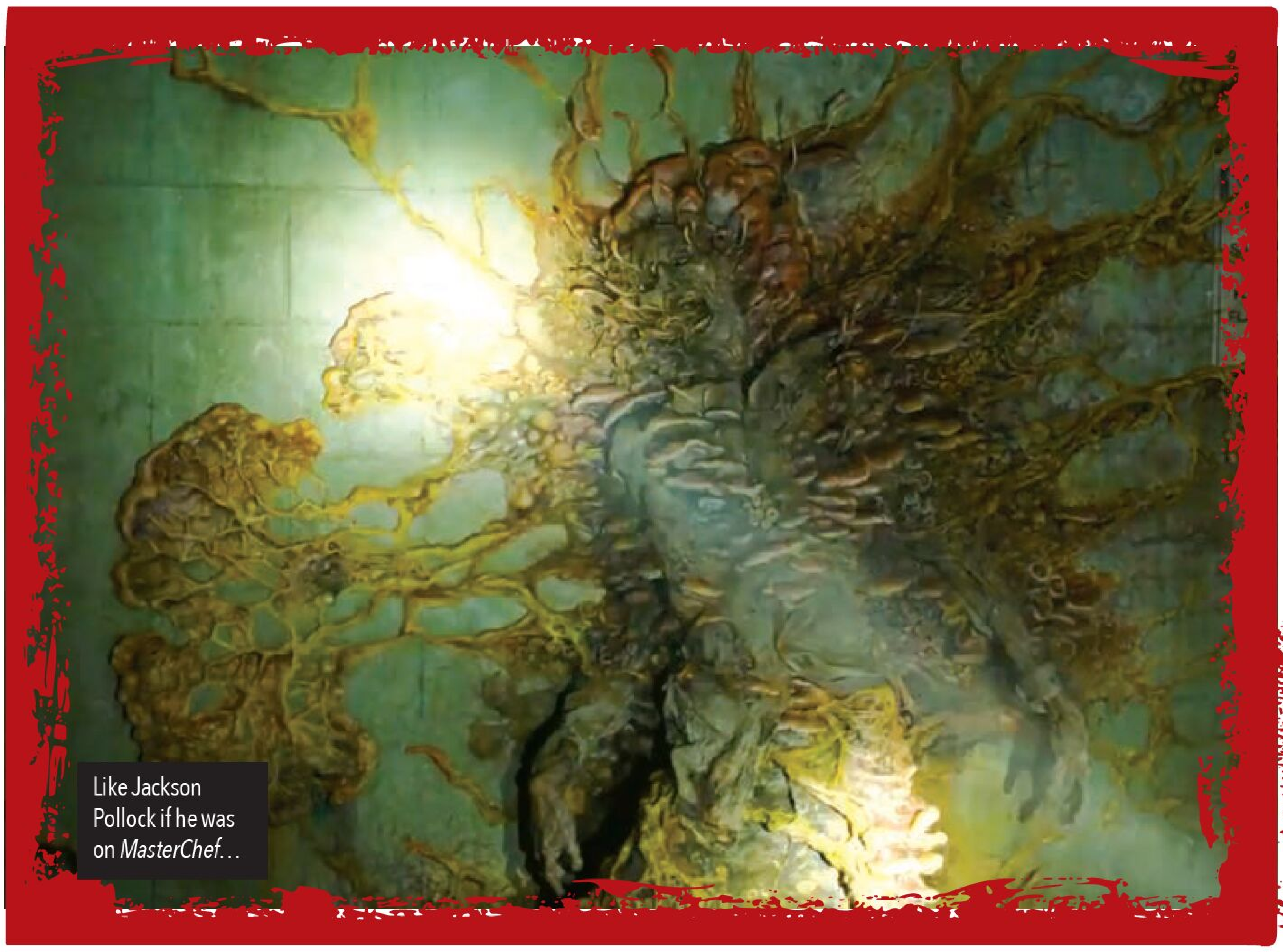
Before the series aired, while most fans applauded the casting of Pascal, Bella Ramsey faced a small but vocal online backlash, with some whining that they didn't look enough like the Ellie from the game.
Willow: "As if that's important. They should be looking for the best actor."
Lizz: "You often find that with female characters. It's all the gaming bro types. It was like that with the *Ghostbusters* remake."
Steve: "Pedro Pascal is such a sex symbol now that it seems crazy that when the *Star Wars* people hired him for *The Mandalorian*, they cast him as someone who only shows his face about once a series. It's really just a voice acting job."
Miles: "Someone should redub the whole series with Bobcat Goldthwait instead. That'd learn 'em."
Lizz: "Who?"

The action cuts to Ellie and Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies. It turns out that it was Marlene that placed Ellie at FEDRA Military School when she was young, in order to keep her safe.
Miles: "So Merle Dandridge is Marlene here, and she's one of the only actors to have played the same part in the video game."
Willow: "So why is Ellie so important?"
Lizz: "Because she's been bitten by the Infected, but hasn't gone mad. So the Fireflies think she holds the secret to the cure."
Willow: "So she's Harry Potter? The girl who lived."
Miles: "Which would make Marlene Dumbledore."
Lizz: "And Joel Hagrid?"
Steve: "Who's Dobby then?"
Britt: "We're overthinking this."
Steve: "This plot point is one of the reasons this show pisses all over *The Walking Dead*, in that there's an end in sight. Ellie is possibly the key to how this finishes, whereas in *The Walking Dead*, it just plods on and on and on, like a zombie you can't kill."

Meanwhile, Joel and Tess discover the remnants of an Infected, splayed on a tunnel wall.
Britt: "That's weirdly beautiful isn't it. Like if Jackson Pollock painted with fungi."

"THAT'S WEIRDLY BEAUTIFUL ISN'T IT. LIKE IF JACKSON POLLOCK PAINTED WITH FUNGI"

The moment every viewer fell in love with Ellie.


Like Jackson Pollock if he was on *MasterChef…*

Steve: "It's a bit like a magic eye painting. Looks abstract at first, then you realise there's a human body at the centre of it."
Lizz: "I wonder if people still eat mushrooms in this world? I'd really miss mushroom risotto."
Miles: "I hate mushrooms on pizza."
Willow: "Didn't ask, but thanks."

Joel and Tess encounter the Fireflies, with Marlene urging them to smuggle Ellie out of Boston and to the Massachusetts State House in return for a fully fuelled truck, guns and supplies. She doesn't, however, tell them why Ellie's being transported.
Willow: "So why not tell them she's immune? Surely that would make Joel and Tess take this seriously and make sure nothing happens to Ellie?"
Miles: "I'm not sure. Maybe it's because Marlene thinks that if they knew Ellie might prove valuable to them they might hold her to ransom?"

It suddenly occurs to Lizz that every person in this scene, apart from Joel – that's Marlene, her fellow Firefly Kim, plus Ellie and Tess – is female.
Lizz: "This show, and the game, is so great for female representation. They're all really strong women."

Having accepted Marlene's offer, Joel takes Ellie back to his ramshackle apartment, where she spots something. It's the *Billboard Book Of Number 1 Hits*. It turns out this is part of a smuggling code – if his radio plays a '60s single it implies no new information, a '70s one implies a new message and an '80s song warns of trouble ahead. After he stirs, she tells him it was something called *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go…*

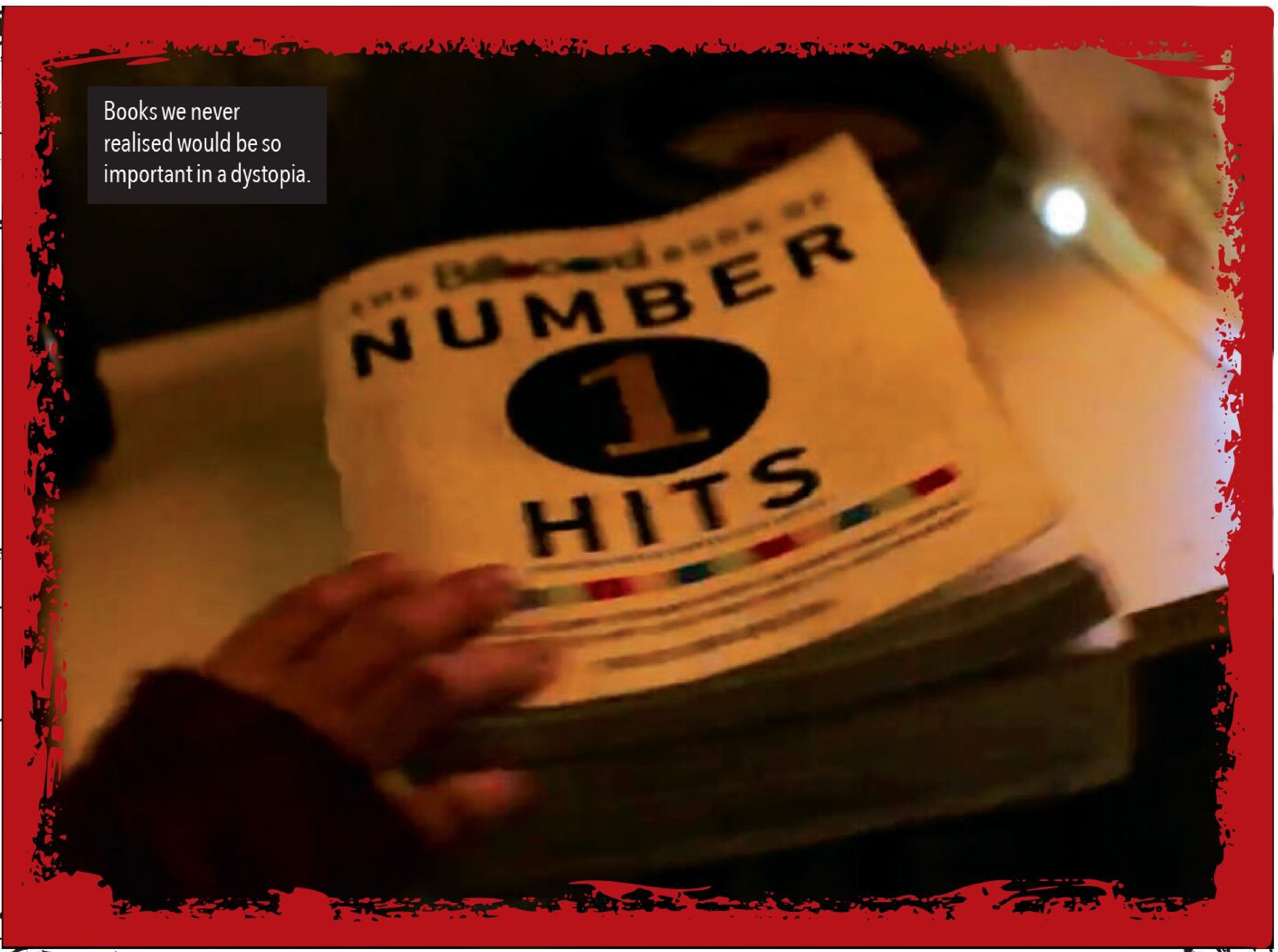
"I WONDER IF PEOPLE STILL EAT MUSHROOMS IN THIS WORLD? I'D REALLY MISS MUSHROOM RISOTTO"

Steve: "Makes you wonder what happened to Wham! The outbreak happened before George Michael died, so did he get infected? Is Andrew Ridgeley okay? Is he one of the Fireflies? I can't get these questions out of my head."
Britt: "I wonder how many of Band Aid are okay in this 2023? Did Bono go mad and eat The Edge? Was Phil Collins hung for being an insurgent?"

As Joel, Tess and Ellie attempt to flee Boston and the Quarantine Zone they encounter the FEDRA soldier who we saw Joel seen dealing contraband with earlier in the episode. When Ellie stabs him in the leg, Joel sees his opportunity to overpower the guard, but has a flashback to the bastard that shot Sarah, and he begins to pummel the FEDRA soldier.
Steve: "It's… like… you're… that… man!!!"

Joel is punching the soldier so relentlessly, his head's a mush.
Miles: "Actually, that's kind of how Pedro Pascal's character in *Game Of Thrones* ended up. Face like a dropped soufflé."

As the episode ends, the camera closes in on Joel's radio, which starts playing *Never Let Me Down Again* by Depeche Mode.
Willow: "Don't you have to be a bit of an '80s kid to know what that means? I'm presuming that's an '80s song, but I dunno – it could mean 'New Message'."
Steve: "It was a hit – though not a number one – in 1987."
Lizz: "It's a good song. I might check out *The Last Of Us*' playlist on Spotify."
Britt: "So what did we all think of that? I think it's a brilliant opener."
Lizz: "It's the best show on TV at the moment. Period."
Miles: "I loved the game, and was a bit wary of the TV show before it aired, but it's proper good. Best game-to-TV adaptation ever. Even better than the *Super Mario* series with Captain Lou Albano as Mario."
Steve: "Was he a real Captain? Hang on, who on Earth *is* Captain Albano?"
Miles: "It doesn't matter."
Willow: "I loved that. Can we watch episode two now?" ■



Books we never realised would be so important in a dystopia.

FROM PLAYSTATION TO PRIMETIME

HBO'S SERIES HAS BEEN PRAISED FOR ITS FAITHFULNESS TO THE GAME THAT INSPIRED IT – YET THERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO, AS MILES HAMER EXPLAINS…

Although the prestige series of Sony's beloved bestseller was a remarkably faithful adaptation, several major differences between the two developed like a monstrous fungal infection. Proceed with caution…

Samuel Hoeksema as one of the show's terrifying Clickers.

CORDYCEPS CONCEPTION

The Cordyceps mutation that kick-starts the apocalypse is explored in far greater depth on telly than in the game, kept deliberately vague in Sony's original. The HBO hit not only starts with a handy 1960s-set chat show cold opening in which the theoretical science is laid out, but a large chunk of episode two covers the specific origin of the Jakartan-based infection (South America in the game, geography fans).

In both versions, the outbreak's locale is pinpointed to a grain and flour factory. We've never looked at mushroom pizza the same since.

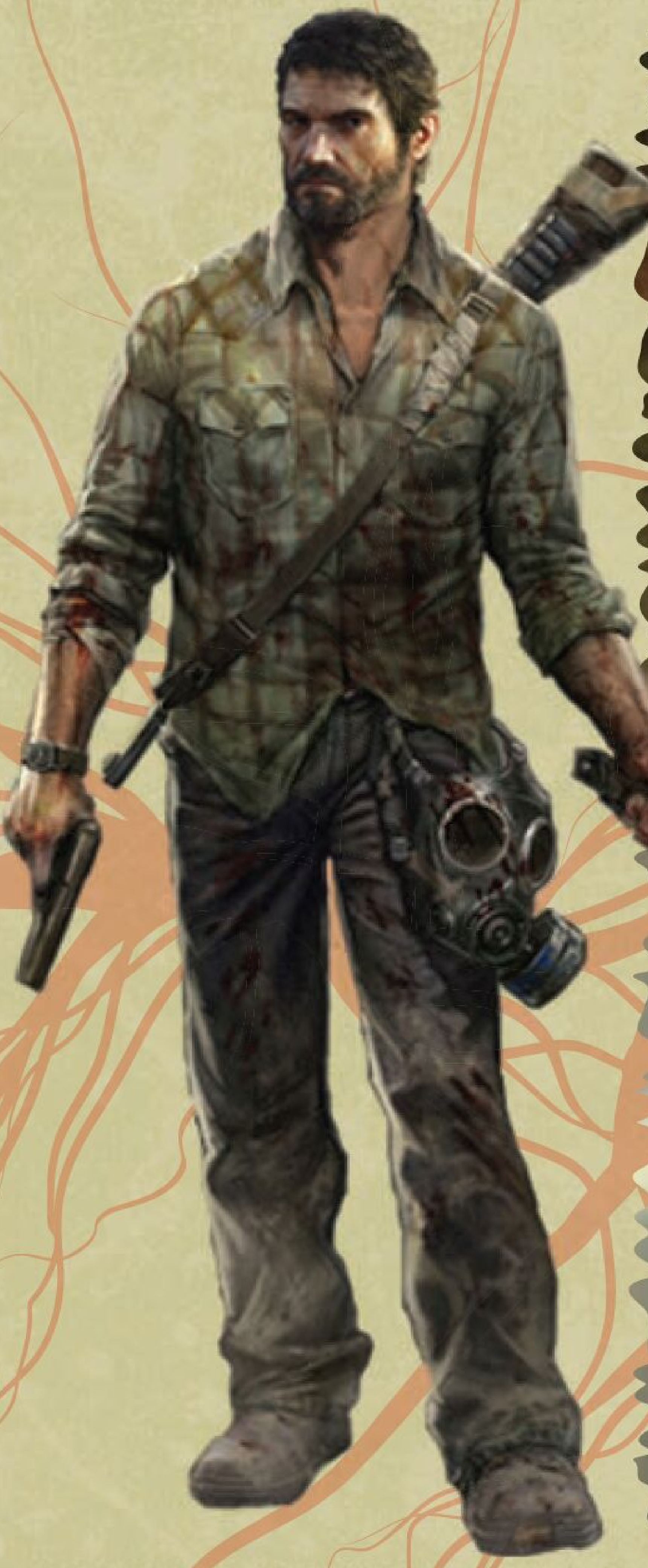
CORDYCEPS SPREAD

From game to gogglebox, the drama's fatal fungus has dramatically different methods of infection. Co-creators Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann deliberately curtailed the threat's airborne nature for the small screen. A major component of the original game was to navigate Joel and Ellie away from infectious guffclouds of doom. A concept easily communicated visually via gaming's prescriptive pathways, but harder (and to be honest, more boring) to establish on television. Hey, it's infinitely more visually thrilling to have your heroes escape from a scary monster than, you know, a bit of deadly wind.

Additionally, steering clear of death-dealing spores requires covid-style face masks. Fine in a video game where you typically spend most of the time peering at the back of the protagonist's head. Less so when HBO has paid their handsome star the big bucks to appear on your telly. Speaking of whom…

JOEL

Thanks to both the twinkle-eyed charm of screen veteran Pedro Pascal, and a narratively-driven sanding down of the character's rougher edges, the show's primary protagonist has become less of a grizzled lone wolf than in the original game. Worn knees, panic attack-prone, and partially deaf, Joel is presented as a much more vulnerable, grief-stricken warrior than the trigger-happy brute of Naughty Dog's blockbuster. To further highlight his emotional fragility, his motivation gets an upgrade too. In the game, he was content to act as Ellie's protector purely on the promise of a weapons cache. The TV show ramps up the



Pedro Pascal: just like the Joel of the game, but a little more dreamy-looking.

sympathy by establishing him as a lost soul simply trying to find and save his missing brother.

Another added slice of humanity sees him openly question and regret his former mercenary antics. It's a character ploy that the talky nature of television is much better at than video games. The latter is, after all, a medium that usually asks the player to slaughter everything on screen, grab the high score, then get out of there. Introspection rarely translates to the gamepad. (It's why you never see the likes of Mario examine his endless quests to save princesses or scoff mushrooms.)

It has to be noted that Joel's near-fatal injury is arguably a lot more impactful on the PlayStation. Rather than getting clumsily stabbed as in the TV show, during the game he's thrown from a building and kebabbed onto a metal rod, yet still manages to shoot his way out. Told you he was a badass.

> "JOEL IS PRESENTED AS MORE VULNERABLE, GRIEF-STRICKEN WARRIOR THAN TRIGGER-HAPPY BRUTE"

TOMMY

Joel's younger brother is not only greater plot-bait for his protective sibling, but there are a few key differences in his timeline across the TV series. The show looks to the future for plot elements, cribbing details from the game's 2020 sequel. Faithful nag Shimmer, Maria's pregnancy, and the movie night at Jackson all get an early airing during the series' sixth episode. More crucially, the brothers' slightly chilly reunion didn't originally take place in Jackson as on the show, but at a hydroelectric power plant.

TIMELINE

Joel tragically lost daughter Sarah in 2003 as Cordyceps spewed its sinister spores across the globe, causing panic, death and destruction in its wake, right? Well, that's true of the HBO series, where the action then shifts 20 years to contemporary 2023. But those who played Sony's belter the first time around experienced an entirely different timeline. In that, Joel lost Sarah in the outbreak of 2013, the game's release year.

As per the programme, the action then moves 20 years on to a yet-to-happen 2033. None of which make the slightest ripple to the eventual storyline in either universe, though the impish portrait of then President George W Bush on the classroom wall is a stark reminder of just how long ago 2003 was. In both versions, Sarah's still a fan of fictitious band Halican Drops (at least according to her t-shirt), so it's nice to see their fake career spanned at least a decade.

TESS' DEATH

Joel's partner in smuggling and (probably) snuggling, hard-nosed survivor Tess suffers a slightly different, if equally sacrificial death to her video game counterpart. Beyond the confines of the quarantine zone in the Massachusetts State House, the game shows her sustaining a deadly infected bite. Then, before she succumbs to the inevitable, she bravely staves off FEDRA soldiers to allow Joel and Ellie to make their escape.

Anna Torv as the doomed Tess.

Nick Offerman won an Emmy for his role as Bill; we think Murray Bartlett as Frank deserved one too.

“ON THE PLAYSTATION, BILL’S PARANOIA STEMS FROM HAVING LOST FRANK IN EVENTS WE NEVER SEE”

The show keeps the location and sacrifice the same, but changes who she held back, namely a horde of vicious infected. Taking them out in a mighty ball of flames, the enormous explosion saw the character immolate in a tragic, triumphant blaze. Aside from its obvious visual impact, the change was brought about by sheer scriptwriting logic. As writer Craig Mazin remarked on *The Last Of Us Podcast*, “Why would FEDRA even be here? What are they doing? There’s nothing there for them to police, really. It didn’t make much sense to me to have FEDRA all the way out there.”

Either way, Tess is toast, and her ex and his human cargo escape to the safe house of arguably the show’s most touching episode.

BILL & FRANK

The doomed survivalist lovers of the TV show have a radically different timeline and fate than their polygonal counterparts. The rightly-celebrated episode showing the pair’s post-apocalyptic romance was absent entirely from the game – in fact it’s barely even alluded to.

For starters, Ellie actually meets Bill in the game, in which he’s more swivel-eyed maniac than the curmudgeonly grump from the telly. On the PlayStation, Bill’s paranoia stems from having lost Frank in events we never see play out. All the player glimpses of the latter is his hanged corpse (a post-infection suicide), and a line spat out bitterly by the clearly devastated Bill. So it’s both something of a screentime upgrade for Frank, and a clearly more positive tone for the pair. Instead of succumbing to infection and hatred (the game suggests the pair part acrimoniously), the two die peacefully together in love, a little dappled sunlight shone into the gloom.

ELLIE

Joel’s ward and – let’s face it – surrogate daughter Ellie faces something of a character makeover for the series. In contrast to Joel’s softening for the screen, Bella Ramsey’s fizzing energy and fiery temper bring a brittle edge to the wayward orphan.

Her pivotal first kill on the TV show differs significantly from a narrative and character standpoint. In the game, Ellie steps up to lethally take down an enemy

IMAGES SKY, SONY, NAUGHTY DOG

who's trying to drown Joel. The show has a much darker take on the beginning of her bodycount. As she confesses to Joel, she was forced to take the life of her best friend and girl crush Riley when both were infected with the Cordyceps virus. *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, the DLC that informed this plot point, is much more ambiguous about Ellie's actions.

Fun fact: When Ellie takes a meat cleaver to James of the cannibal cult, the actor she's offing is Troy Baker, who plays Joel in the games. Also, her onscreen mum is played by Ashley Johnson, the original voice of Ellie! Don't think about it too much, your head will start to hurt.

HENRY & SAM

There are a fair few alterations concerning the tragic siblings at the heart of episode five's dramatic pelt through a contaminated city. Changing the locale from Pittsburgh to Kansas, the show portrays younger brother Sam as a deaf character, which he wasn't in the PS3 title. Actor Kevionn Woodward genuinely is deaf, winning the part from a casting call looking for an actor confident with sign language.

When asked about the change on the show's official HBO podcast, co-creator Mazin explained, "I became nervous that there was a mode of communication between Joel and Ellie that I didn't want to feel like I was repeating between Henry and Sam because as Neil [Druckmann, co-creator] points out, in the game, you don't spend time with Henry and Sam on their own. But if they are on their own, and we knew we wanted to do that, what do those discussions sound like? And it could very easily fall into the trap of exasperated father figure and a curious, concerned, scared child figure."

Lamar Johnson and Keivonn Woodard play brothers Henry and Sam Burrell.

Melanie Lynskey's Kathleen Coghlan was a terrifying addition to the series.

Some fans of the game complained at Bella Ramsey's casting as Ellie, but their fiery performance quickly won people over.

KATHLEEN

Henry and Sam's sign language helped the renegade pair silently and successfully communicate their plans of escape from the infected. And perhaps even more threateningly, the militia movement led by the vengeful Kathleen, the latter a completely original invention for the show. Her single-minded search ramps up the episode's stakes, adding extra pace to an already explosive environment. Henry, repurposed as a FEDRA informant in this universe, faces the wrath of Kathleen's city swarming with trigger-happy rebels. The ruthless resistance leader blames him for the death of her brother, a plot thread nowhere to be found in the game. ■

EPISODE 2

INFECTED

THE SHOW'S SECOND EPISODE MARKS THE START OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP, WRITES ROB LOCKWOOD

THE STORY

In a pre-credits flashback to 2003 we learn how the first infections were discovered in Jakarta, Indonesia. Meanwhile, back in 2023 Joel and Tess decide what to do about Ellie, who claims to be immune to Cordyceps infection. Eventually the three of them decide to take her to the Fireflies, venturing out through the ruins of Boston. There they encounter a vast swarm of dormant infected and are attacked by a pair of Clickers. Ellie is bitten, but is strangely unharmed. Joel wants to go back to the Quarantine Zone, but Tess reveals that she has also become infected and can't return. When they're attacked by a swarm of infected, Tess sacrifices herself, allowing Joel and Ellie to escape.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

The Last Of Us' second episode opens in striking fashion, not in the post-apocalyptic world of the Boston Quarantine Zone, 2023, but some 20 years earlier in the bustling streets of Jakarta, Indonesia. This cold open – a narrative technique that throws the viewer straight into the action, often with no immediate explanation of what is happening – was partially inspired by the way the writer and showrunner Vince Gilligan would often begin episodes of his series *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. In the case of *Infected* the scene chillingly dramatises the moment where a professor of mycology discovers, to her horror, precisely how screwed the world is…

"We had this plan for this montage where we saw all these places in the world and what had happened to them, and we just didn't have the money for it," co-showrunner Craig Mazin explained to HBO's *The Last Of Us Podcast* of the opening sequence. "We thought it would be really interesting to see where it all begins. And as we often do, we then immediately asked ourselves the question, 'What person can we convey this through?'"

The answer to that question was Indonesian actor and activist Christine Hakim, who plays Professor Ratna Pertiwi. Hakim gives a memorable performance in the episode, but was initially hesitant to take on the role, telling the *Malay Mail*, "My mom was 86 years old at that time and my husband is a heart patient and diabetic, I can't leave my responsibility as a daughter and as a wife behind and I said to my manager 'no' because what if something were to happen to me or to them within that time?" She was eventually talked around by her husband, however. "After my husband reassured me, as a wife and a Muslim, I felt the burden on my shoulder was gone and I called my manager the next morning and said okay to the role."

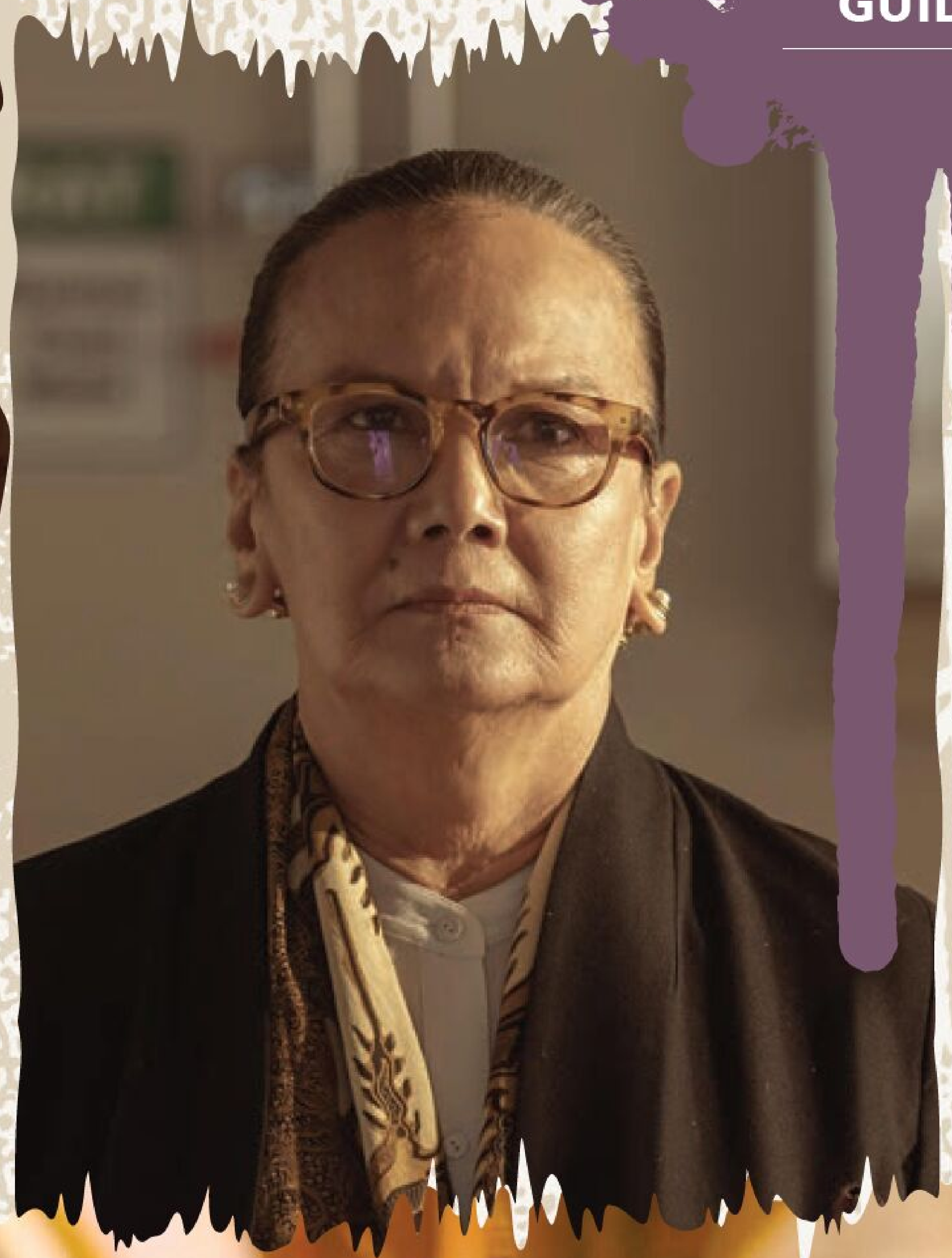
Having moved forward in time to 2023, the vast majority of *Infected* takes place in the desolate ruins of Boston, an evocatively decayed city that is nevertheless haunted by the infected. It's an impressive visual and one that lends a real sense of grandeur to the show, but it took a lot of work to transform the streets of downtown Edmonton to something that more closely resembled the capital of Massachusetts. "The real challenge was downtown Boston," production designer John Paino told *Vanity Fair*. "Brick-lined streets that were built during the Revolutionary War – that kind of look, and we looked very far and high and low for that, we couldn't find it. So

THE INFO

Broadcast: 22 January 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Neil Druckmann

GUEST CAST

Anna Torv as Tess
Christine Hakim as Ratna Pertiwi
Yayu AW Unru as Lt Gen Agus Hidayat



FAST FACT

THE EPISODE WAS ORIGINALLY TITLED *CORDYCEPS ORDO SECLORUM*, BUT THIS WAS CHANGED WHEN MAZIN REALISED THAT THE LITERAL TRANSLATION – "CORDYCEPS ORDER OF THE CENTURIES" – DIDN'T MAKE SENSE. IT'S SPECULATED THAT IT WAS ORIGINALLY INTENDED TO TRANSLATE AS "CORDYCEPS WORLD ORDER".

everywhere they walk, and pretty much everything around them for a good amount up to 20 feet, we dressed, we built, we dressed, we sculpted. We would make blisters that we added to the streets. Craig [Mazin] really wanted to make things as realistic as possible."

Impressively, the majority of this was achieved practically, rather than with CGI. "We didn't have an extensive amount of green screen on our sets," Paino continued. "We didn't just have them walking down a street on the stage with green screen on either side. Even if they walked through

BEST LINE

"WELL I DIDN'T SHIT MY PANTS!"

ELLIE, AFTER SURVIVING THE CLICKER ATTACK.

something for 10 minutes, five minutes, two minutes, we wanted to make sure it felt absolutely real and that it had been abandoned for 20 years."

Infected was an especially notable episode for co-showrunner – and *The Last Of Us* creator – Neil Druckmann, as it marked his first experience directing for TV. He was immediately struck by how much more planning needed to be done ahead of time. "In the game we do this performance capture: everybody is wearing these funny suits with these balls. And then once you get their performance and you kind of have it in 3D, you can place the camera wherever you want, you can change the costume, you can change the set. You could even change the character," he told *The Last Of Us Podcast*. "Can't do it on the TV show… for the most part the frame you have is going to be pretty much your final frame."

Despite these new challenges Druckmann says that he found the experience of directing the episode a hugely positive one. "It's one of the highlights of my life," he told the podcast. "I sometimes tell people it's like, 'Oh it's as if they made Disneyland just for me!'" He also found the experience of seeing his game adapted by some of the most talented people currently working in TV hugely flattering. "I got all these people that are so in demand and they want to make *The Last Of Us*! That's the thing

STAR TURN

ANNA TORV AS TESS

While Bella Ramsey is already stealing the show as Ellie, it's hard to argue against Anna Torv as the star of this episode. Thanks to the beauty of flashbacks this isn't the last we'll see of Tess in the show, but it's the end of the character's life and Torv fills her final scenes with fear and nobility as she accepts her fate and sacrifices herself for Joel, Ellie, and – just perhaps – humanity itself. This is only episode two and we've not spent a huge amount of time with Tess, but Torv's performance means her death is a real emotional sucker punch.

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

GOOFS

In the cold open, as Dr Ratna Pertiwi is driven to the lab in Jakarta, we see cars driving on the right. Cars are driven on the left in Indonesia.

People who have spent much time in Boston may notice that the locations of famous buildings such as Fanueil Hall and Boston City Hall are not accurate to the layout of the real life city.

FAST FACT

THE EPISODE GAINED A 22% INCREASE IN VIEWERS FROM EPISODE ONE – THE BIGGEST GROWTH FOR WEEK TWO OF AN ORIGINAL HBO DRAMA EVER AT THAT TIME.

they want to work on for their next 200-day gruelling shoot. I walked in on set, I could feel that love and it made me emotional to see that and feel it."

Arguably the episode's biggest set piece comes towards the end, with the introduction of the Clickers – an iconic foe from the games, terrifyingly recreated in the show. Once again Craig Mazin was resolute that the creatures should be created using practical effects where possible. "If you go into a CGI characterisation right off the bat, it just starts to feel like it's not there," Mazin told the HBO podcast. "We really wanted to find prosthetics to actually turn somebody into a Clicker, which the Gowers [Barrie and Sarah Gower, who led the episode's prosthetics department] did incredible work on."

Indeed, Barrie Gower himself had anticipated that the Clickers would need to be realised with a large CGI component and was surprised when the prosthetics proved – for the most part – enough. The results, for actors

EASTER EGGS

Ellie's question, "So there aren't super infected that explode fungus spores on you?" is a reference to the game's spore mechanic, which was left out of the TV show, in favour of the fungal tendrils we see this episode.

Tess's lighter is the same as Sam Drake's lighter as seen in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, another video game from *The Last Of Us* developers Naughty Dog.

The two Clickers are voiced by Misty Lee and Phillip Kovats, who also voiced the creatures in the original game.

FAST FACT
THE EXTERIOR OF THE BOSTONIAN MUSEUM WAS ACTUALLY THE FRONT OF THE CANADIAN BANK OF COMMERCE BUILDING REDRESSED.

Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey, were alarmingly convincing. "I knew that they were going to pull something really brilliant out of the hat as far as that was concerned," Pedro Pascal told *Rotten Tomatoes*. "But I didn't expect it to be as real looking on the day!"

Ultimately, however, the most significant aspect of *Infected* isn't the new monsters or its vivid depiction of this bleak world, it's how the relationship between the two lead characters starts to form in the aftermath of Tess's death. Joel begins the episode deeply sceptical of Ellie, but by the end he is committed to transporting her safely to the Fireflies. "For the first time Ellie, who was following Tess out of the QZ and who was being protected by Tess in the salon, and who was asking Tess questions about what happened to the world, and who doesn't like Joel, Ellie is now suddenly stuck with and relying on Joel," said Mazin on the official podcast. "It is the beginning of that." *Infected* sets up a character dynamic between its two lead characters that will carry us through the rest of the season. ■

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

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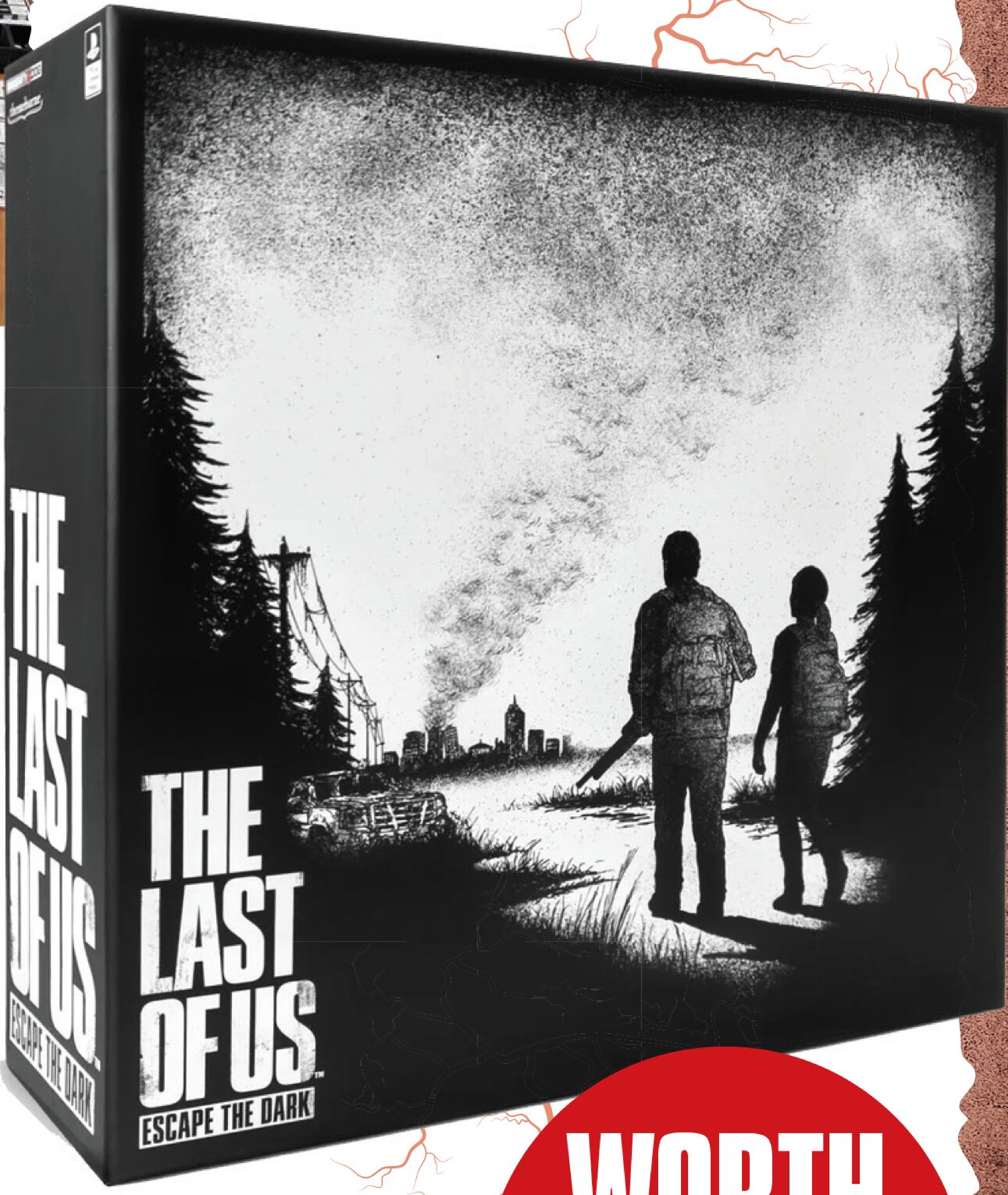

You and your friends play a group of survivors, building your own unique tale of survival in an open world map from the critically acclaimed The Last Of Us franchise! Your journey begins in a forsaken quarantine zone. Your goal? To travel to the reputed safe haven of Jackson… and to stay alive, of course!

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THE LAST OF US DNA

AS UNIQUE AS IT IS, THERE ARE SEVERAL FILMS AND TV PROGRAMMES THAT HAVE HELPED INFLUENCE *THE LAST OF US*. HERE, WE SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON SOME TITLES THAT SHARE GENETICS WITH OUR FAVOURITE SHOW…

THE FUGITIVE

(TV, 1963-1967)

If you've only ever seen the Harrison Ford-headlining big-screen version of *The Fugitive*, you may not see any similarities to *The Last Of Us*, but the original TV series shares quite a few chromosomes with the HBO show. *The Last Of Us* is unusual in TV terms for moving from location to location each week, just as *The Fugitive* did. On the run from the police, accused of a murder he didn't commit, the series saw Dr Richard Kimble (played by David Janssen) travel to a different locale every week, with a fresh set of characters and a new problem to solve. Apart from Janssen the only regular cast member was the detective on his trail (played by Barry Morse), just as *The Last Of Us* has two main characters who appear in every episode.

SURVIVORS

(TV, 1975-1977)

This BBC drama from the pen of Dalek creator Terry Nation was one of the most talked about TV shows of the 1970s. After a virus escapes from a Chinese laboratory, killing 4,999 out of every 5,000 human beings on Earth, the series follows those that survived as they attempt to navigate their new reality. Like *The Last Of Us*, there were episodes that showed humanity at its worst, and the conflicts between competing groups of survivors, while also exploring how you rebuild a world from the bottom up. The series was remade by the BBC in 2008, lasting two seasons.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN; IMAGES ISTOCK, SKY, HBO, BBC, DISNEY+, AMC

THE WALKING DEAD

(TV, 2010-2022)

The Last Of Us' infected may not be bona fide zombies, but there's still a strong zombie vibe to its depiction of a post-apocalyptic America. *The Walking Dead* wasn't, of course, the first drama about the undead – hell, the first zombie movie dates back to 1932 – but it did help revive interest in the genre. Of course, the movies of George A Romero (*Night Of The Living Dead*, *Day Of The Dead* et al) certainly fed into Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's comic series that in turn led to the TV adaptation, while it can't be a coincidence that *The Last Of Us* game arrived just a few years after *The Walking Dead* premiered on AMC.

28 DAYS LATER

(Film, 2002)

Danny Boyle's frenetic stir-fry of John Wyndham and George A Romero was a game-changer when it was released in 2002. There is, of course, much here that a *The Last Of Us* fan will recognise, but the main difference is that while the game and TV show pick up their story 20 years after a pandemic, *28 Days Later* kicks off, well, just one month after the outbreak of a highly contagious, aggression-inducing virus. The movie spawned a sequel in 2007, *28 Weeks Later*, with a third film, *28 Years Later*, arriving later in 2025.

LOGAN

(Film, 2017)

There's not a lot that binds *The Last Of Us* with the regular X-Men movies, but this Wolverine-centric drama from 2017 is something of an outlier in the Marvel canon, with the character, otherwise known as Logan, accompanied here by a young girl named Laura. Like Joel, Logan is gruff and hard to love, but he'd do anything to help protect Laura, just as Joel would do anything to keep Ellie safe. Though Patrick Stewart guest stars, the film's effectively a two-hander between Hugh Jackman and British actor Dafne Keen. (Both revived their roles, incidentally, in 2024's *Deadpool & Wolverine*). ■

CHERNOBYL

(TV, 2019)

Writer Craig Mazin told *Decider* in 2019: "If I came to HBO and said 'I want to do another season of *Chernobyl*, except it's gonna be about another tragedy,' whether it's Bhopal or Fukushima or something like that, I would imagine they at least would give me polite interest." *The Last Of Us* would be Mazin's next TV project and while Bhopal or Fukushima don't feature, it's not hard to see shared blood between his two shows. There's an oppressive bleakness to both series, but where *The Last Of Us*' gloomy ambience comes from the fact that society has broken down because of a devastating pandemic, *Chernobyl*'s depiction of Ukraine after the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster is only too real.

EPISODE 3

LONG, LONG TIME

THE SEASON'S THIRD EPISODE IS A MASTERFUL TEAR-JERKER, SAYS ROB LOCKWOOD

THE INFO

Broadcast: 29 January 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Peter Hoar

GUEST CAST

Anna Torv as Tess
Nick Offerman as Bill
Murray Bartlett as Frank

THE STORY

Ellie and Joel head to Bill and Frank's house in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The story then flashes back 20 years to the evacuation of the town. Survivalist Bill (Nick Offerman) transforms a street into a secure compound. Another survivor, Frank (Murray Bartlett), arrives and though Bill initially mistrusts him, the two quickly fall in love and build a life together over the next 20 years, expanding the compound, befriending Joel and Tess, and fending off raiders. When Frank becomes terminally ill, the couple spend one last day together before taking their own lives. Ellie and Joel arrive shortly after, but Bill has left them some much needed supplies and a car to help them on their journey.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

Episode three, *Long, Long Time* is almost universally acclaimed as the season's high point, but it marks a major diversion from the rest of the show. Although Joel and Ellie appear in several scenes at the start and end, the bulk of the episode takes place in a series of flashbacks focusing on two other survivors: survivalist Bill, played by *Parks And Recreation* star Nick Offerman, and *The White Lotus*' Murray Bartlett as Frank. These two characters (minor features of the video game, with Frank only appearing as a corpse) are promoted to the stars of the show for one episode only. The result is a tender and heartfelt love story in the middle of the apocalypse.

Long, Long Time was filmed in September 2021. As with the vast

GOOFS

The Cumberland Farms logo that appears in this episode was not introduced in the real world until 2009, some six years after the fall of civilisation in *The Last Of Us*.

FAST FACT

***THE LAST OF US* WASN'T NICK OFFERMAN'S FIRST BRUSH WITH SCI-FI – HE WAS THE LEAD IN ALEX GARLAND'S CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED TV SERIES *DEVS* IN 2020.**

majority of the season, shooting took place in various locations around Alberta, Canada, including Sheep River Falls, where the opening sequence of Joel paying silent tribute to Tess was filmed. The bulk of the episode, however, is set in Bill's compound – a street of empty houses that he transforms into a safe haven for himself and Frank. This opulent yet eerie locale was filmed in High River, a small town on the outskirts of Calgary, in the former Beachwood Estates – a once wealthy neighbourhood that was evacuated in 2013 following a devastating flood. Despite this natural dereliction, all of the buildings, including Bill and Frank's home, were newly constructed for the TV show. "None of the roofs were built, all the roofs were VFX," cinematographer Eben Bolter told *The Standard*. "All of the exterior was almost like a Western town that we built out in the middle of nowhere."

The episode was helmed by the BAFTA-winning British director Peter Hoar, previously known for his work on *Doctor Who*, *Daredevil* and *The Umbrella Academy*. Hoar had just completed work on writer Russell T Davies' hugely acclaimed AIDS drama, *It's A Sin*, when he was offered the chance to work on *The Last Of Us*. "I was blessed to be able to do it, I couldn't believe it had come to me," Hoar told *Inverse*. As a gay man himself, Hoar found particular resonance in the central romance between Bill and Frank. Talking to *The Standard*, he said, "When I did [*It's A Sin*], I did it because it was a great script and a great writer. But what it taught me in the aftermath was literally how important it is to tell those stories. I grew up with stories about gay relationships that were always tragic," he says. "But I think love and hope are a big part of this show… I think the story of Bill and Frank was just a small, unique way of doing that."

Of course, making the viewers care about two new characters rather than wondering where Joel and Ellie were required finding the right actors for the parts. "Initially the role of Bill was going to be played by Con O'Neill, who played Bryukhanov, in *Chernobyl*," Craig Mazin told *The Last of Us Podcast*, but the actor had been cast on HBO pirate comedy *Our Flag Means Death*. "We couldn't do it with Con and that's when the idea of Nick came around."

It's hard to imagine anyone other than Nick Offerman inhabiting the part of Bill now. Casting a straight actor in the role of Bill gave the showrunners and Offerman himself some pause, however. "The key is you have to do your homework and you have to talk to people who have walked in the shoes of these characters and most importantly you have to give them room to tell you where you gotten it right and where you've gotten it wrong," Mazin continued. "We were very lucky because [Frank actor] Murray is a married, middle-aged gay man. Peter Hoar, the director who did such a beautiful job, is a married, middle-aged gay man… 'middle-aged', as it turns out, is more important than 'gay' in this story, because it was important to me to tell a story about what older, longer, committed love looks like."

As it happened, Offerman and Mazin already knew each other.

BEST LINE

"NOT TODAY, YOU NEW WORLD ORDER JACKBOOT FUCKS!" (BILL)

STAR TURNS

NICK OFFERMAN AS BILL AND MURRAY BARTLETT AS FRANK

Given that the episode is largely a two-hander, it would be churlish to give it to either Offerman or Bartlett and ignore the other. They're both terrific, hilarious, heartbreaking and always empathetic. They don't just offer the best performance of the episode, but of the entire season. Offerman is, of course, best known for his role as the breakfast-loving Ron Swanson in the cult sitcom *Parks And Recreation*, and Australian actor Murray Bartlett won critical acclaim in 2021 through his work on the first season of *The White Lotus*.

FAST FACT

DESPITE THE EPISODE BEING A HUGE SUCCESS, THE INCLUSION OF LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS PROVOKED THE IRE OF IDIOTS ONLINE, WHO ATTEMPTED TO REVIEW BOMB THE EPISODE WITH NEGATIVE RATINGS ON IMDB.

"One of my fellow baseball dads was this guy who did *The Hangover*," Offerman told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "Then he became the *Chernobyl* guy and we were like, 'Holy shit.' So I knew Craig, I knew his work, I admired him powerfully." As a fan of *The White Lotus*, Offerman was also excited to work alongside Bartlett. "Craig said, 'Here's the script and, and you get to do this with Murray Bartlett.' I just said [to myself], 'Please don't

fuck this up. Please don't let me be cancelled before I get this episode!'" Bartlett, for his part, told *Deadline* how much he was wowed by the script. "I could see this incredible relationship, this sort of vignette, that [showed] so much of the relationship [as it] passed through time. I was just blown away by it."

The Bill and Frank storyline begins in 2003, but spans a period of 20 years – something that required a lot of time in the make-up chair to give the two actors the illusion of ageing. "You try and do it as chronologically as possible," Offerman told *GQ*. "We had at least four or five different versions of age, and wigs, and facial hair, and prosthetics. Practically, you don't want to have to go from one to the other to cut out all that changeover time."

One of the elements that links Bill and Frank – and which gives the episode its title – is their love of music. Mazin had struck upon the idea of finding a show tune that the couple would bond over, but couldn't find the right piece. He eventually texted his friend, the Broadway musician, actor and radio DJ Seth Rudetsky, who initially suggested *Her Face* from *Carnival*. Mazin was excited by the choice, but decided that it wasn't quite right given the romance was between two men. "He sent me the scenario," Rudetsky told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "A closeted man sings a show tune and another man who is not in the closet listens and knows, wait,

EASTER EGGS

Bill's letter to Joel, found at the end of the episode, in some ways mirrors Frank's letter to Bill from the original video game. Joel even goes on to crumple up the letter, as Bill does in the game.

The final shot of the episode is the open window of Bill and Frank's bedroom. This is, in part, a reference to the open window seen on the main menu of the game.

FAST FACT
DIRECTOR PETER HOAR STARTED HIS PROFESSIONAL CAREER AS A RUNNER ON THE BRITISH MEDICAL DRAMA *PEAK PRACTICE.*

that's not you singing to a girl. So I said, all right, well, my favourite devastating song is *Long Long Time*." The piece, sung by Linda Ronstadt, was the perfect choice to underpin the emotional drama of the episode. Its inclusion also hugely raised the profile of the track – in the hours after the episode's broadcast it saw a 4,900 per cent increase in streams on Spotify in the US compared to the previous week and topped three Billboard charts for the week preceding 11 February.

Long, Long Time is an outlier in the first season of *The Last Of Us* and not the sort of episode that many fans would have predicted. It's also a brilliant piece of drama – heartfelt and moving in a way that you might not expect from what is, primarily, a zombie horror show. Diverting so significantly from the game – and only three episodes into the season – probably felt like a risk to the showrunners, but it's certainly one that paid off, leading to a slew of award nominations, including a win for Nick Offerman as Outstanding Guest Actor in a Drama Series at that year's Emmys. A tremendous piece of work, it's the high point of a consistently excellent season of television. ■

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

THE A-Z OF THE LAST OF US

WORDS: MILES HAMER

A IS FOR... ACTION

One minor voice of dissent about the TV series adaptation was its comparative lack of infected, the mutated marauders who infest the original game. As showrunner Craig Mazin explained to *Screen Rant*, “Ultimately, we generally stressed the power of relationships and trying to find significance within moments of action, so there may be less action than some people wanted, because we couldn’t necessarily find significance for quite a bit of it, or a concern that it would be repetitive. After all, you’re not playing it, you’re watching it.” He has, however, hinted at more infected grisliness in future seasons...

B IS FOR... BILL

A frothing madman in the game, but brittle sourpuss with heart of gold in the show, Bill is the totemic character that shows the potential of humanity in a post-apocalyptic world. He certainly made the critics sit up and take note: actor Nick Offerman won an Emmy for his performance, and the episode subsequently vacuumed up multiple awards like some sort of gold-sucking Dyson.

C IS FOR... CANADA

Or Hollywood North as it’s known colloquially. As in many other shows and films, the tax-friendly country doubles as the US of A for location shooting. The series might seem as American as apple pie and relaxed gun laws, but in reality, it’s more maple syrup and mounted policeman. Edmonton stood in for Boston, Calgary became Kansas, and Fort MacLeod took the place of Austin, Texas (utilising the exact same street as seen in *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*).

D IS FOR... DRUCKMANN & MAZIN

Game developer and TV writer/producer respectively, Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin stand as the series' fathers, their combined creative alchemy building the show from the ground up. Whilst Druckmann co-created the original PlayStation game (with Bruce Straley), Mazin was gilded with major industry kudos for being behind critical darling *Chernobyl*. It was arguably the latter's success that earned *The Last Of Us* its commission. (Mazin also scripted some *Hangover* and *Scary Movie* sequels, so you might say he's always had his hand in writing pain and suffering.)

THE LAST OF U
FYC
THE LAST

E IS FOR... ELLIE

The immune 14-year-old orphan who may just hold the biological key to the infection's cure, Ellie is surrogate daughter to not just Joel, but all of fandom. The character's origins began life as an unused concept from blockbuster video game *Uncharted 2: Drake's Fortune*, and spiralled from there. Fun fact: asked not to play the game beforehand to avoid emulating Ashley Johnson's performance, Ellie actor Bella Ramsey only tackled the PlayStation after season one had broadcast. They described the experience on YouTube as, "not as weird as I thought it would be".

F IS FOR... FEDRA

Struggling to regain control over the apocalypse, the Federal Disaster Response Agency flexes its authoritative muscle over the city's quarantine zones, thanks to a lethal combination of panicking populace and a trigger-happy zealotry. Basically a military dictatorship, they've been vying hard with the slathering monsters as the primary villains. Burning bodies, executing survivors, and restricting medicine? Just a day in the life of your average FEDRA grunt!

G IS FOR... GUSTAVO SANTAOLALLA

The man behind both game and series' mournful, hair-raising melodies, the Argentianian-born composer is arguably solely responsible for setting the series' elegiac tone. (Try watching the opening titles with something epically wrong like John Williams' triumphant *Superman* theme instead and you'll see what we mean.) Santaolalla's fragile, ethereal folk strings permeate the mood and lift every scene in which they feature. And no, we haven't forgotten co-composer David Fleming's contributions, whose organic pulses and discordant beats add an urgent edge to the action.

H IS FOR... HBO

The American cable channel synonymous with prestige telly, a video game adaptation being broadcast by the same people who brought the world the likes of *Game Of Thrones*, *The Sopranos* and *Boardwalk Empire* lends the series a credibility that, let's face it, few would have afforded it beforehand.

I IS FOR... INDONESIA

Home to the guilty flour mill that started (and promptly ended) it all, the Southeast Asian country has the ignominious dishonour of bringing the Cordyceps infection to the world. Thanks a bunch, Indonesia! In fairness, it also suffered the first mass casualty event: upon realising stopping the virus was unstoppable, Mycologist Ratna Pertiwi suggested the tactical bombing of Jakarta, taking out over 10 million citizens. Sorry Indonesia.

J IS FOR... JOEL

Contractor, smuggler and survivor, it's our main man Miller, whose actions you control in the video game, and story we follow in the show. Joel's a complicated cookie; with grief and gruff woven into the character's fabric, the former father's emotional rebuilding provides the steely backbone of the drama. Partially based on Josh Brolin's Llewelyn Moss from *No Country For Old Men*, he could easily have morphed into a cookie-cutter grizzled gunslinger. However, thanks to both Troy Baker and Pedro Pascal's superbly nuanced performances, the character transcends that cliché with ease.

K IS FOR... KANSAS CITY

The deadly battleground between revolutionaries, traitors and the infected, with Joel and Ellie caught in the middle, never has the phrase, "we're not in Kansas anymore" been more confusing. A city that ceded control to an insurgent group, the brutality on offer and miserable living conditions demonstrate that the chaotic rebels really aren't any better at looking after their citizens than FEDRA.

L IS FOR... LGBT

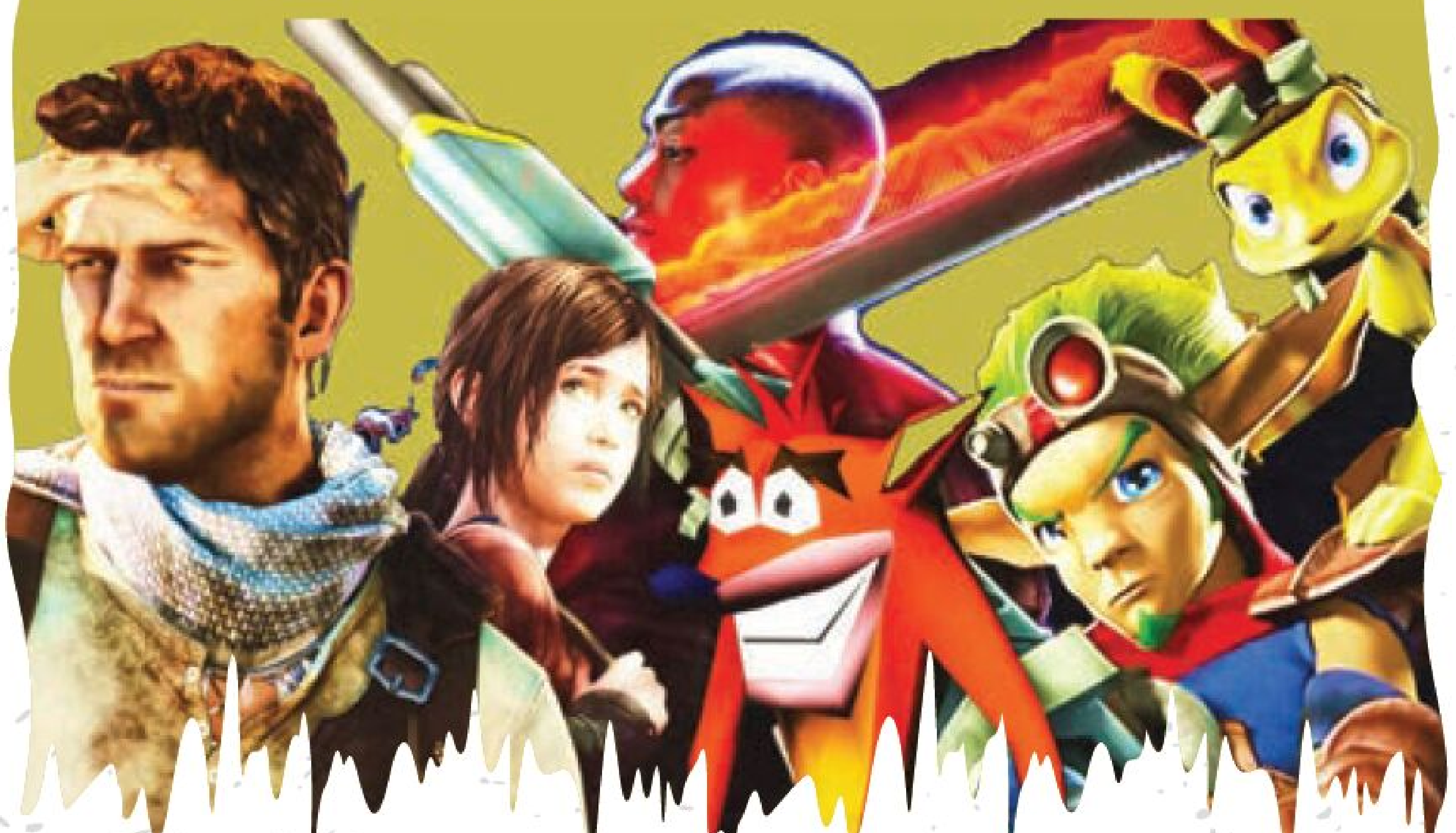
Despite the grey skies and endless concrete there's no hiding the rainbow colours that permeate the gloom. From Bill and Frank's tearjerking romance, Ellie's discovery of her same-sex attraction, and the trans character of the second game (and upcoming season), *The Last Of Us* universe is as diverse as it is thrilling.

M IS FOR... MILITIA

FEDRA foils and handy with a rifle or dozen, resistance group the Fireflies are the revolutionary other side of the armed coin that inhabit the apocalypse. Formed by Marlene to combat the government's increasingly fascistic stronghold over the populace, the group's fearsome fanaticism will stop at nothing to vanquish the strong arm of the government and put a stop to the infection.

N IS FOR... NAUGHTY DOG

The video game developer that brought the original Sony game to the world. Founded in 1984 by then kiddie coders Andy Gavin and Jason Rubin, the company took another five years to get its mischievous hound name. Their fortunes went stratospheric shortly after, thanks mostly to perma-grinned marsupial *Crash Bandicoot* on the original PlayStation. It was the *Tomb Raider*-like PS3 series *Uncharted* which laid *The Last Of Us*' groundwork, however. Its irresistible blend of action, compelling characters and story-driven gameplay set the phenomenally successful template for Joel, Ellie and a lot of deadly mushrooms.



O IS FOR... ONLINE

Or more accurately now, offline. The game's much-anticipated live service sequel was officially canned in December 2023, leaving gamers worldwide throwing down their control pads in disappointment. A multiplayer game based on the 2020 sequel, Naughty Dog devs were frank about the heavy demands it would have made on the team, ultimately impacting the quality of their solo games. So they kiboshed the venture completely. Whether abandoned concepts and characters make it into either a future sequel or even the TV series remains to be seen.

P IS FOR...PARASITE

How likely is a mass Cordyceps infection? Before you head to the woods with some fungicide and an attitude, let's not get carried away. Yes, there's a grain of scientific plausibility at the heart of the show; the fungal parasite does take over insects, and controls their behaviour, zombie-like, to release more of its spores into the atmosphere. But these subspecies – Ophiocordyceps – have evolved specifically to just attack these breeds which suit the fungi's needs. As scientists have pointed out, us humans are just too big and complicated for all that bother, frankly. Phew!

Q IS FOR... QUARANTINE

A depressingly familiar concept now thanks to Covid, but locking down communities and restricting citizens' movements seemed the stuff of far-flung dystopian sci-fi when the game launched in 2013. Established as military-patrolled zones, they offer citizens protection from the infected in return for manual labour and somewhere to sleep at night. With ration cards the main currency and dilapidated accommodation not exactly five star, smuggling and crime are rampant. The military's reassuring response? Public executions! OK, we'll just put that bread roll back...

R IS FOR... ROTTEN TOMATOES

Much like its video game counterpart, the TV adaptation is drowning in tangible praise. Amongst its impressive trophy haul, the series boasts an embarrassment of Emmys, Golden Globe noms and BAFTAs. Not to mention its Saturn Award, Critics Choice, Dorian, Black Reel and GLAAD accolades. Plus a *Fangoria* Chainsaw Award! Finally, the show has earned a whopping 96% approval on *Rotten Tomatoes*. (Never before has the remaining 4% been so wrong.)

S IS FOR... SARAH

Joel's bright-eyed optimist daughter, the fate of the 14-year-old is the tragic catalyst for her father's dark descent into haunted survivor mode. Her untimely death at the hands of a soldier is the personal disaster that hardens Joel's heart and sows the seed of military distrust (grimly impressive, given his brother served). Pedro Pascal's first scenes on set were with Sarah actress Nico Parker, affording the actor a chronological verisimilitude in shaping his character's journey. "It was an incredible opportunity for me to get started in that way," he told *Metacritic*.

T IS FOR... TESS

The small chink of light in Joel's post-apocalyptic life, only to be snuffed out by a self sacrifice, Tess is the binding glue who connects Joel to Ellie. No Tess, no meeting Frank and Bill, no getting caught up trying to get a car battery from Robert, and definitely no agreeing to smuggle the infected Ellie to Massachusetts State House.

U IS FOR... UNDERGROUND

Fungi isn't a big fan of bright light and suntans (which is why mushroom sunbeds don't exist). Generally, the organism grows in low-level lighting and damper climes. Which is why there's a thriving hoard of infected just beneath the surface of Kansas City, including the exceptionally brutal and grotesque bloater. Thanks to an extended period of mutation, this testy toadstool can tear apart enemies with its fists alone. Ouchies.

V IS FOR... VOICE CAST

The original game from 2013 lived or died on the strength of its story, and those delivering it. Mercifully then, the voice actors gave their pitch pipe best, bringing to life the real pain, struggles and jeopardy faced as the narrative unfolded. Joel and Ellie actors Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson played different characters on telly, whilst Merle Dandridge made the full transition from voice booth to sound stage as the exact same character, Fireflies resistance leader Marlene.

FEATURE BY MILES HAMER; IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO, SONY, NAUGHTY DOG

W IS FOR... WYOMING

Home to Jackson, the little community that could. The perishing climate might freeze its populace's bones but the warmth of its citizens is enough to melt even the chilliest of hearts. More importantly, that cold has kept the infected from bothering the citizens, leaving the commune to thrive under its democratically elected council. With power, heating, fresh food, religious pluralism and even a movie night, the community is a beacon of hope in a world that's all but gone entirely dark.

X IS FOR... XBOX

Fooled you, the games are never coming to Microsoft's rival machine. Ever. Naughty Dog is a Sony-exclusive company, and the Japanese tech giant is keeping it that way. It hasn't stopped fans mocking up XBox covers, dreaming for a slice of the infected action. The game has been ported to PC however, with *Part II* belatedly arriving this April. In the meantime then, the only way to experience *The Last Of Us* on a Series S/X would be to stream the TV show via NowTV or HBO Max. So there.

Y IS FOR... YUMMY

Life after Cordyceps is tough, especially in the kitchen. No more mass-produced, processed microwave meals. Returning to a time of pre-industrialisation, food is now grown, hunted, shot, skinned and the rest. (Berries and bunnies are rarely off the menu.) FEDRA feeds its population with nutritionally-deficient rations, whilst some survivors have, terrifyingly, gone all Dr Lecter on their fellow man. Pass the fava beans.

Z IS FOR... ZOMBIES

Ssh, we're not using the z word. They're infected. Yes, they're former humans who are now relentless, single-minded savage beasts with a psychotic will to survive and an uncontrollable urge to transmit the virus to humans by biting. But does that sound like a zombie to you? I mean, even a bit? Come on! ■

EPISODE 4

PLEASE HOLD TO MY HAND

IN THE FOURTH EPISODE, JOEL AND ELLIE ENCOUNTER AN AMBUSH IN KANSAS CITY... BY DAVE GOLDER

THE STORY

On their road trip to Wyoming, Joel and Ellie are forced by a roadblock to take a detour through Kansas City, where they're ambushed by members of a revolutionary group that's overthrown the local FEDRA forces. Their car is destroyed, and they only escape after Ellie shoots one of the attackers, but they're still trapped in the city. The revolutionaries are led by Kathleen, who's hell bent on finding and executing the man who killed her brother, while ignoring other urgent matters (such as a subterranean infected threat). While in hiding with Ellie, Joel falls asleep and wakes to find a gun pointing at his face.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

As Ellie and Joel continue their road trip across the USA, bonding over bad jokes, stories from Joel's past and – eventually – guns, the biggest surprise in store for fans of the original video games was that a whole major set piece was moved from Pittsburgh to Kansas City. Not that there was any actual filming in Kansas City; Canada's Calgary stood in for that role.

"I love Pittsburgh," explained Craig Mazin on the show's official podcast. "But really what it came down to is that the Pittsburghness of Pittsburgh wasn't necessarily important. And... because we were shooting in Alberta – largely around Calgary, a little bit in Edmonton – it looked closer to Kansas City. It literally came down to: it was just harder to manufacture Pittsburgh [there]."

"It was also about distances and where we want them to be on the journey at a certain time of the year," agreed Neil Druckmann on the same podcast, adding, "It's one of those things that I refer to as a superficial change, because what city you're in is not important."

The additional distance of driving from Massachusetts to Kansas City rather than to Pittsburgh also meant there would be more in-story time for Joel and Ellie to bond, a significant theme of the episode.

"It's also the first moment where Joel talks," continued Mazin. "I mean, obviously Joel speaks in the first three episodes, but he doesn't go on at length. And they are driving in the car, and she asks him about Tommy, since that's where he wants to go, and he talks for a really long time. I just love that notion that Joel doesn't even realise that it's happening."

In general, Mazin recalled elsewhere in the podcast, "Pedro would get so annoyed at me, because I would always be saying, 'Joel's not that smart.' He would be like, 'Can you please stop saying that?'"

In fact, none of the road trip at the start of the episode was filmed in the USA. Many of the scenic shots were filmed near Strathmore, to the east of Calgary, including a view of the Lethbridge Viaduct, enhanced by CGI to show it wrecked with a train dangling from it. The blocked freeway tunnel that prevents Joel and Ellie from bypassing Kansas City was constructed around Calgary's Airport Tunnel to the northeast of the city.

Once inside Kansas City the episode introduces a new character, who wasn't in the games – leader of the revolutionaries, Kathleen, played by *Yellowjackets*' Melanie Lynskey. To viewers used to the hard-as-nails, testosterone-driven antagonists of other post-apocalyptic shows, her apple-pie exterior disguising a rotten core was something a bit different for the genre, but one that appealed to Lynskey.

THE INFO

Broadcast: 5 February 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Jeremy Webb

GUEST CAST

Melanie Lynskey as Kathleen Coghlan
Lamar Johnson as Henry Burrell
Keivonn Montreal Woodard as Sam Burrell
Jeffrey Pierce as Perry
John Getz as Edelstein
Juan Magana as Bryan

FAST FACT
THE EPISODE'S TITLE IS TAKEN FROM THE LYRICS OF *ALONE AND FORSAKEN* BY COUNTRY SINGER HANK WILLIAMS. THE SONG ITSELF IS USED IN THE EPISODE WHEN ELLIE AND JOEL ARE ON THE ROAD BEFORE THEY REACH KANSAS CITY (IT WAS ALSO USED IN THE GAME).

GOOFS

This is a weird error that the show has inherited from the game: considering what a "bear" is in gay slang (feel free to Google), the cover star for *Bearskin* magazine is surprisingly lacking in body hair.

Talking to *Variety* she revealed that when old friend and show co-creator Mazin called her about the role, he opened with, "I would love for you to play a war criminal!"

He went on to expand the description. "He basically said, 'Imagine if you were Jesus' sister. Your brother was the greatest man, who was just so wonderful to everybody, who you loved and revered, and then he was brutally murdered. And you're just this ordinary person who knows that they're not that great of a person, who has to then step into this role and is sort of consumed with wanting vengeance.'"

In the podcast, Mazin admitted, "Typically, you wouldn't cast Melanie in this role, because there's a sweetness to her, but that makes this role that much more interesting. Yes, there's maternal softness, because you get the feeling that this person's not designed to be angry. So if they are, what made them like that, and what are they capable of doing?"

Kathleen's right-hand man, Perry, was played by not so much a familiar face, as a familiar voice for *The Last Of Us* fans: Jeffrey Pierce, who voiced Joel's brother Tommy in the video games.

When Pierce learned that HBO was making a live-action adaptation of the game, he immediately emailed his old boss Druckmann eager to be part of it.

"I said, 'Look, I know it's not Tommy, but I'll come do anything that's going to help push the story forward,' Pierce told *The Wrap*. "They had me audition for a different part… and they came back and said, 'Look we're never going to believe that you're a victim, so we'll see if there's something else down the road.' And maybe two weeks later they called and said, 'Look, we got the perfect thing,' and they sent me the two scripts and I was, of course, overjoyed."

They gave him one other instruction: "Don't cut your hair!"

His own take on Perry was that he was a "Kurosawa samurai ronin looking for his purpose," who, "had seen a career in the military, out of high school into the military, and then up through the ranks and then into the warfighter tier. And then the world collapses out from underneath them and his skill set is what allows him to survive in the wild until he ends up in Kansas City."

For Bafta- and Emmy-nominated director Jeremy Webb, who has plenty of big-budget genre shows on his CV (such as *The Umbrella Academy*, *Locke & Key* and *Altered Carbon*, to name just a few), *The Last Of Us* was the "largest train set I ever had a chance to play with," he told *Dragoncast*. "Logistically and financially, it's a little bit like D-Day."

According to Webb, "Craig and Neil had a very specific vision about wanting it to feel very authentic. The point of view of the characters

FAST FACT

PEDRO PASCAL AND BELLA RAMSEY IMPROVISED SOME MORE PUNS WHILE FILMING THE ROAD TRIP SEQUENCES BUT NONE OF THEM MADE THE FINAL CUT.

BEST LINE

Joel: "You're just a kid. You shouldn't know what it means to… It's not like you killed him. But… shootin' or… I know what it's like the first time that you hurt someone like that. If you, uh… I'm not good at this…"
Ellie: "Yeah, you really aren't."

STAR TURN

JUAN MAGANA AS BRYAN

Let's hear it for one of the really minor characters. Juan Magana plays Bryan, the guy Ellie shoots, who then pleads for his life before Joel finishes him off. Much of his performance is only heard, as the camera concentrates on Ellie on the other side of a partitioning wall, listening to him wailing for his mum and mercy. But it's a really powerful, gut-wrenching scene, and Magana doesn't hold back. The whole, "I want my mummy!" thing could have been a corny cliché but here it feels frighteningly authentic.

was really important, because obviously the game is very much from their point of view. You discover things as you're moving through these extraordinary landscapes and spaces. So the show had to lean into that. You would want to be predominantly with either Ellie's point of view or Joel's point of view.

"And we had these discussions about, well, if we're going to do these kind of classic end-of-world vista shots, whose points of view are they [from]? And we resisted for quite some time doing drone shots – those big, epic Roland Emmerich-type vistas."

He admits, though, that they did eventually get drawn into having some aerial photography, "gently gliding over the land to see a destroyed America" but that was because episode four was the series' first chance to show "destroyed, overgrown America" on a grand scale. "They really wanted to keep the Boston part of the story very kind of claustrophobic, then, as they move through America, the vistas start to open up."

And, he admitted, they only had a few stray vehicles wandering into the back of shots that had to be cut out. ■

FAST FACT

JEFFREY PIERCE, WHO PLAYS PERRY IN THE EPISODE, TOLD *GEEK CULTURE* THAT WHILE IT MAY NOT COME ACROSS EXPLICITLY IN THE EPISODE, "I KNOW THAT PERRY IS ABSOLUTELY IN LOVE WITH KATHLEEN."

EASTER EGGS

The gay porn mag, *Bearskin*, that Ellie finds in Bill's car is a stunningly accurate recreation of the mag seen in the original video game, right down to the coverlines.

The joke book *No Pun Intended: Volume Too* by Will Livingston – and indeed many of the jokes that Ellie reads from it – first appeared in the original video games.

The cinema Joel and Ellie pass in Kansas City (actually Calgary's Globe Cinema) still has *Matchstick Men* and *Underworld* displayed on its hoarding – both films were released in September 2003, when the first wave of the infected hit.

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

HOW TO SURVIVE A CONTAGION *LAST OF US* STYLE

NEIGHBOURS PERISHED IN A HORRIFIC BURST OF FUNGAL MESS? HOME COMPROMISED BY BITEY MONSTERS? TIME TO SMARTEN UP AND SURVIVE. WITH THESE LIFE-SAVING TIPS, YOU MIGHT JUST TOUGH OUT THE APOCALYPSE. MILES HAMER GRABS HIS BACKPACK AND GETS TO SAFETY.

HIDE

First of all, you're going to want to find somewhere that's secure, guarded, and provides the basics for a contagion-ravaged aftermath. Plenty of options lay ahead of you, but choose wisely.

FEDRA

The government has your back, right? Why not take shelter with the last slither of remaining order in this crazy world?

PROS: Structure, heavily-armed protection from the infected in a secure city base, regular food, work, and a healthy, if perhaps overzealous, justice system.

CONS: You're the bad guys, and your work is either slaughtering friends for minor transgressions, or more likely, shovelling shit.

THE FIREFLIES

Number one in FEDRA's crosshairs, these pesky revolutionaries are looking for the light and know how to fight.

PROS: Rebellion's sexy, yeah? Also, you get to run fulfilling* errands! And if you're very lucky, you may get to wear a pretty little pendant. That'll go perfectly with your natty new green/yellow threads. Plus, by taking out government soldiers, you get to literally stick it to 'the man'.

*definitions may vary.

CONS: You'll almost certainly swiftly develop a wonk-eyed sense of paranoia, everyone wants you dead, and you'll either end up being shot by, or shooting at, your former friends. Also, is emerald really your colour?

THE JACKSON COMMUNITY

Get to Wyoming and find yourself a slice of pre-pandemic idyll boasting warmth, power, and more weapons than a *Call Of Duty* sidequest.

PROS: Self-sustained living, the warm glow of friendly neighbours, and even a movie night!

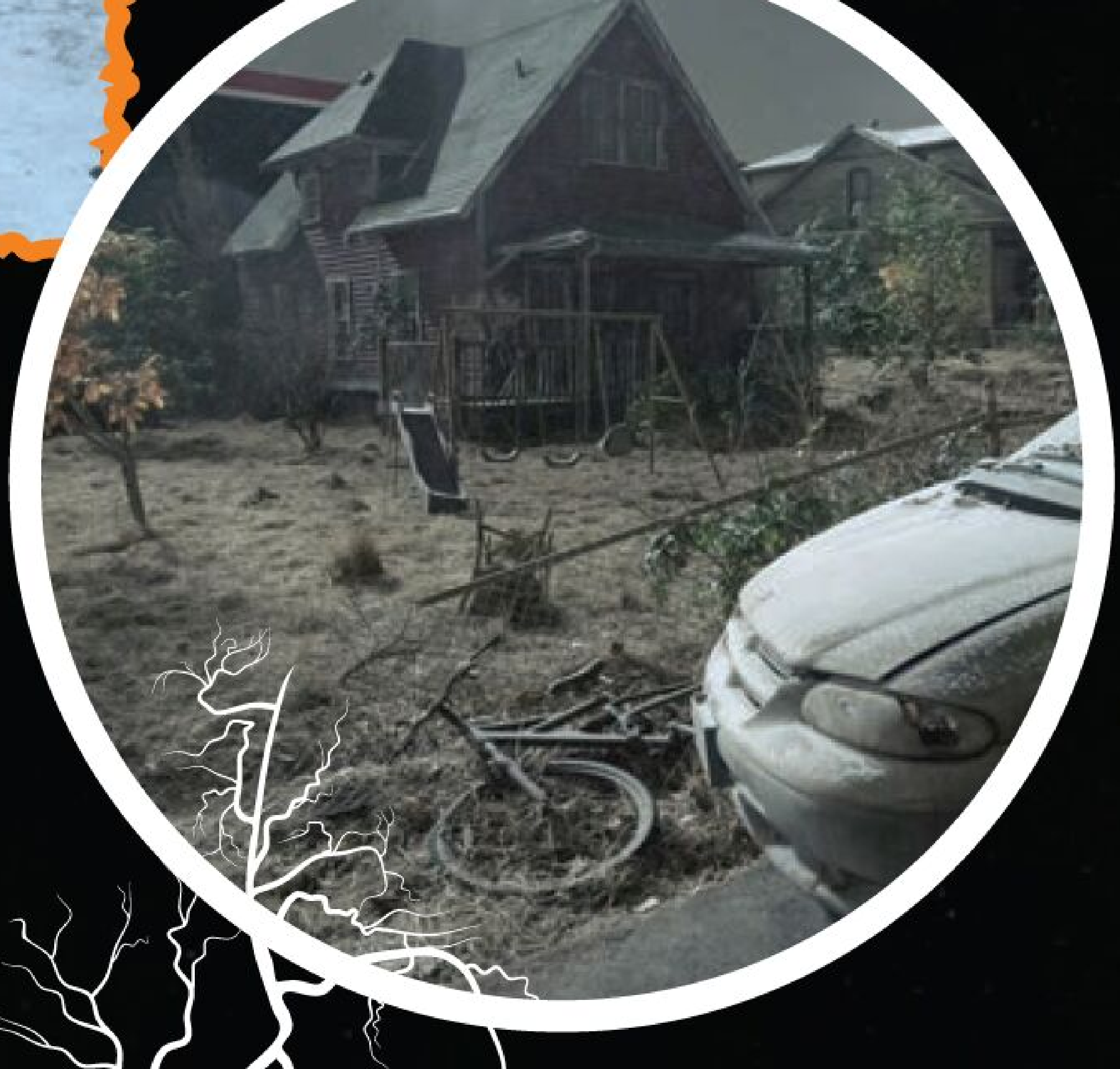
CONS: They don't let just any old Joe Schmo in, and to be honest, the movies do look a bit rubbish.

GO IT ALONE

Already in safe dwellings? Well-established safe house with a delightful white picket fence? Then hold on to this corner of the perished universe and make it on your lonesome.

PROS: No one to save, no one to eat your rations, and no one to tell you what to do.

CONS: You'll need a lot of barbed wire, mechanical engineering and explosive skills are a must, no one has your back, you're vulnerable if you fall ill, and most likely, you'll go stark raving bonkers.



JOIN A CULT

You know the score – worship, rules, cannibalism. Hey, we've all thought about it.

PROS: Protection, community, rituals, and a mysteriously steady supply of fresh meat.

CONS: "Has anyone seen Barbara? She's missing this delicious brisket."

"Dunno, but do pass the barbecue sauce."

IMAGES GETTY, SKY

TRANSPORT

Getting around a contagion-ravaged country is neither advisable or safe. But if you simply must get from A to B without being infected by the Z word, then you'll have to rely on more than shoe leather to make your way around.

Cars are plentiful, but most are full of rust and rotting meat, so be prepared to roll up your sleeves and get to work before you so much as adjust the mirror. Batteries will likely have died so pack at least one spare. Likewise, engines will have seized so be prepared to marinate everything under the bonnet in some 10W-30. In fact, bone up on car maintenance in general, 'cos roadside assistance isn't a thing in the apocalypse. And before you hit the gas, check the boot for passengers, infected, or angry raccoons. No one needs a threatening stowaway on a long road trip.

If you can't get a vehicle on the move then the next best thing has long legs, lovely silken hair, and a mouth like Gary Busey in a funhouse mirror. No, Dave Grohl isn't giving piggybacks across state lines, we're talking horses. More individually navigable than motors, meaning you can cross terrain wheels can't, a horse is both trusted steed and a friend indeed. Keep your nag happy by feeding constantly, giving them reassuring pats, and steering them away from bullets wherever possible.

COMBAT

If you see hordes of infected barrelling towards you, turning 180 degrees and running in the opposite direction is the smart choice. Confrontation should be a last resort. But say you've taken all the necessary precautions, aligned yourself with the biggest bully on the playground, yet you're still facing down a mass of fatal fungi people?

FOOD

As flour was at the heart of the deadly Cordyceps mutation, the public's appetite has all gone a bit Atkins. Sure, bread and suchlike is still available, but it's scarce and badly made. Stock up on scavenged goods - canned meat, candy bars and tinned vegetables make for convenient, if unappetising rations. (It's the end times, Gordon Ramsay's not going to shout at you for overboiling a pan of beans.)

Meat's high up on the food chain, and cattle are plentiful. So get used to scoffing down fistfuls of flesh that's not long mooed its last. The wild has an abundance of deer, but the frolicking sods can be hard to catch. So sharpen up your bow skills, practise your marksmanship, and leave your veganism in the past.

If you've got space and time, try growing your own produce. Cultivating a vegetable patch can elicit personal satisfaction as much as it can essential vitamins. So consider planting your own cabbages, carrots and tomatoes for your daily dose of nutrition.

Maybe not mushrooms though. Never mushrooms.

IT'S TIME TO FIGHT

Like most living things, the infected don't like being stabbed, shot or set on fire. Doing any of the above will incapacitate your attacker for long enough so you can make like Road Runner and meep meep yourself out of harm's way.

Remember, you want to keep contact to a minimum, lest you get bitten, scratched or torn apart by rage-fuelled infection-spreaders. With that in mind, get yourself a firearm.

In a disaster-struck landscape, guns are scattered everywhere. The black market is teeming with them, and you can expect to trade food or favours. If you're strapped for items though, and fancy a freebie, the best starting points are dead people. They tend to drop them in battle, presumably not as good at handling weapons as you hope to be.

If you haven't got a firearm yet, don't worry, you can barely walk a mile without tripping over some heavy artillery. Note: this tip won't work nearly as well in the gun-shy UK, where you'd be lucky to stumble across so much as a Super Soaker.

A nice lightweight 9mm pistol can be stored simply and discreetly, and can still blow the head off a marauding bastard. If defending yourself against an entire group however, you'd be better off with the limb-shattering blast of a pump action shotgun or assault rifle, both of which can tear through multiple attackers at once. Ditto grenades.

But what if you've locked, loaded, and simply ran out of ammo? Impalement it is. Grab a hunting knife, or even just a big old piece of glass (wrapped in cloth to save slicing up your own meat hooks) and make like Michael Myers. A few jabs into an attacker's jugular and you'll be king of the stabby jungle.

Also, before battle, get ready to party like it's 2020 all over again and slap a mask on to prevent spores creeping into your face holes.

Best of luck out there. (Unless you're one of the infected reading this. In which case, how about we just call it a draw and call the whole thing off? That'd be grand, thanks.) ■

EPISODE 5

ENDURE AND SURVIVE

CRAIG MAZIN SERVES UP ONE OF THE FIRST SEASON'S MOST EMOTIONAL EPISODES… BY DAVE GOLDER

THE STORY

Joel and Ellie team up with Henry, the collaborator who killed Kathleen's beloved brother and hero of the resistance, Michael. Henry's trying to escape Kansas City with his own deaf brother, Sam. He reveals he killed Michael for FEDRA, in return for medication for Sam's leukaemia. Using abandoned underground tunnels, Team Joel appears to reach the safety of the suburbs but the resistance is waiting in ambush for them. But then all hell breaks loose as an army of infected erupts from the ground and chows down on the bad guys. Joel, Ellie, Henry and Sam escape but Sam's been bitten. When he turns, Henry shoots him dead, then kills himself.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

By episode five, viewers must have cottoned on that *The Last Of Us* doesn't play by the usual post-apocalyptic-TV-show rulebook. So perhaps having the series finale in the middle of the season shouldn't have been a surprise. To be fair, the show is more concerned with its turbulent central relationship than infected-attack-of-the-week action, and in that sense, the actual season finale delivers magnificently in terms of the character arcs.

But in any other show, swarms of monsters erupting from under ground for four-and-a-half minutes of bloody chaos with bad guys dying horrifically… well, that's a season finale, surely? (Ironically, it *was* actually one of the last things to be shot in the season, primarily filmed in April 2022, shortly before production finished on the actual season finale.)

This sequence is huge. If you include the lead-up to the infected horde making its debut (including the ambush in the cul-de-sac) then it's 12 minutes of screen time that took months of planning and weeks of shooting: the set alone took nine weeks to build, while filming took place over four weeks of night shoots, in blisteringly cold weather. Oh, and two new types of monsters needed to be created, too!

"It feels like the prep for episode five was about 80 per cent that sequence and 20 per cent for everything else," director of photography Eben Bolter told *Vulture*. Part of that prep involved creating a six-by-four-foot scale model with miniature cars and houses to help the various creative departments map out the scene in advance. "We were all like mad world conquerors around this big model. We were like Napoleon," production designer John Paino told *Vulture*.

"This was a massive undertaking," said Craig Mazin on the official podcast. "We knew we were going to be making this big cul-de-sac scene, and we needed to control it completely. We needed to be able to do gunfire. We needed to be able to do burns. We needed an exploding truck. We needed hundreds of extras running around, backlit by fire, lots of stunts, motor vehicles, racing and driving and all this, and it needs to be lit. There's no way to do that practically on a regular street – it's just not going to work."

So instead the cul-de-sac was built from scratch on a studio lot next to the series' soundstages at the Calgary Film Centre. Experienced set-building staff were bolstered by real-world construction specialists, building 13 houses and laying down asphalt drives and paving stones. Then it all had to be realistically aged.

"When I left, they were pouring foundation," Neil Druckmann said on the podcast, "and a month later, I came back and that neighbourhood [was] there."

The sequence also introduced a Bloater to the series, a kind of big

THE INFO

Broadcast: 10 February 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Jeremy Webb

GUEST CAST

Lamar Johnson as Henry Burrell
Melanie Lynskey as Kathleen Coghlan
Keivonn Montreal Woodard as Sam
Jeffrey Pierce as Perry
John Getz as Edelstein

FAST FACT
EDITORS TIMOTHY A GOOD AND EMILY MENDEZ WON AN EMMY FOR OUTSTANDING PICTURE EDITING ON THIS EPISODE.

BEST LINE

Henry: "I don't know what the next step is with something like this, but if I lower my gun, we didn't hurt you, so you don't hurt us. Right?'
Joel: "That's right."
Henry: "That's a weird fuckin' tone, man."
Ellie: "That's just the way he sounds. He has an asshole voice."

boss giant infected from the game. Mazin realised this was one area where the TV show had an advantage, drama-wise, even though they "went back and forth for months" deciding whether to include it or not.

"So in the game, you meet a Bloater in the school gymnasium with Bill," he explained on the podcast. "And the point is, you've got to kill it with nail bombs and keep the shotgun ready in case you run out. And we thought, 'Look, whatever this thing is, and however it got that way, it might be scarier if at some point you realise you're not killing it. Yeah, no one's killing it ever.'" And in the show, no one comes close to killing it.

Instead, the Bloater kills Perry. Originally Mazin wanted it to rip Perry in half, but Druckmann was always concerned that was never going to look realistic, convincing his co-showrunner that, "people don't rip along the waist." The digital FX guys at Weta (famous for the *Lord Of The Rings* films) did their best and Mazin revealed there is some animated footage that looks reasonably realistic, but in the end Perry has his head ripped off instead.

The physical Bloater costume was created by Barrie Gower, who was also responsible for *Stranger Things*' Vecna and *Game Of Thrones*' Night King. It was worn by Adam Basil, a 6' 4" stuntman whom Gower had worked with on *Game Of Thrones*. The Bloater suit weighed around 40kg, which was even heavier than Vecna.

Another new monster, this time new to the entire franchise, was the Child Clicker that kills Kathleen. Designed by Hyoung Taek Nam, who designed the Clickers in the game, she was played by a nine-year-old child contortionist and rhythmic gymnast called Skye Belle Cowton.

"She was the most creepy," recalled Mazin on the podcast. "She's this beautiful little girl, but it's so creepy how she can move her body like that... And I insisted that she wear a *Blues Clues* shirt, because... I just love the contrast of innocence and horror."

FAST FACT

MELANIE LYNSKEY'S ACTOR HUSBAND JASON RITTER (*PARENTHOOD*, *RAISING DION*) HAD AN UNCREDITED CAMEO APPEARANCE AS A CLICKER. "HE TRAINED WITH THE STUNT PEOPLE, AND HE JUST DID ALL THESE AMAZING STUNTS. IT'S LIKE HIS LIFELONG DREAM," LYNSKEY TOLD JIMMY FALLON ON *THE TONIGHT SHOW*, ADDING, "I SHOT HIM. . . SO ROMANTIC."

STAR TURN

KEIVONN MONTREAL WOODARD AS SAM

It would be churlish not to single out Keivonn Montreal Woodard, who at 10 became the second-youngest Emmy-nominated actor ever for his portrayal of Sam. He is also the first Black deaf actor and second deaf actor ever to be Emmy nominated. And he deserved it – he really is incredibly good in the episode. Craig Mazin was certainly impressed on the podcast: "I hope that people in Hollywood think about casting Keivonn again, not in stories about being deaf, but just in stories about people because boy, is he good."

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

GOOFS

There's a continuity error with Sam's writing pad right at the end of the episode. When Ellie places the pad on Sam's grave the pen is loose and in the middle of the pad; when the shot changes to a close-up of the pad, the pen is tucked away at the top.

Around 15 Clicker actors and 60 infected actors (all with movements choreographed by *Planet Of The Apes*' Terry Notary) were prepped by a small army of make-up specialists for the moment when the hordes of infected surge from the pit. Their numbers were bolstered by the digital FX wizards at Weta.

"What they did here is so phenomenal," enthused Mazin on the podcast. "If you study it carefully, there'll be maybe moments where you're like, 'Okay, that one's VFX, but that one's real,' but I guarantee you won't get it all right. It's really hard to tell. It's really beautifully blended."

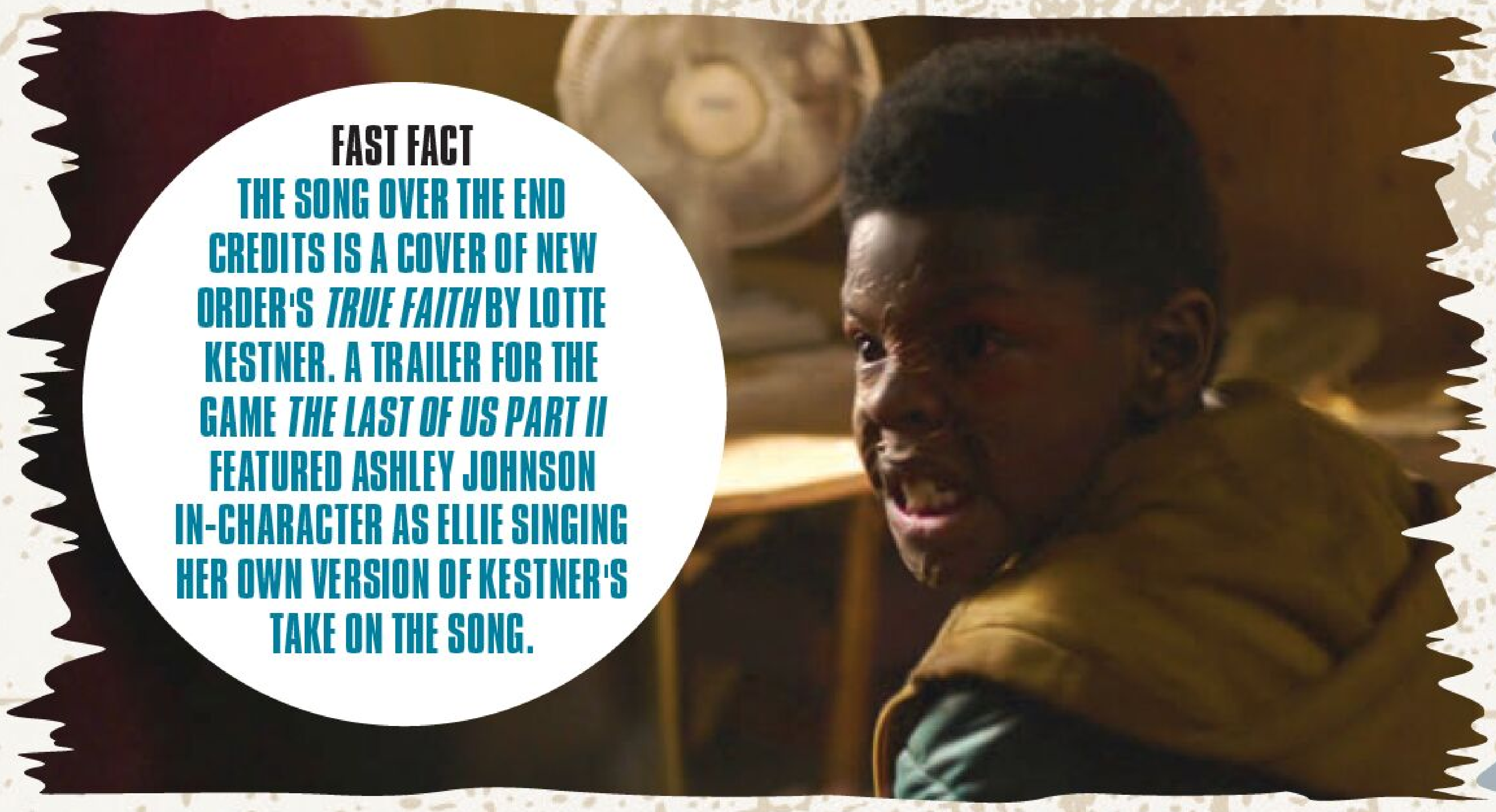
The actors involved were certainly impressed. "They blew up cars, blew up houses. Even when the car sinks, all of that actually happened," Henry actor Lamar Johnson told *TV Guide*. "When [the infected were] coming out of the floor, there were maybe 70 extras all in make-up... We didn't actually need to react to something that wasn't there, because it was actually there."

EASTER EGGS

The episode's title is a quote from the fictional *Savage Starlight* comic that Ellie reads to Sam. This comic book is a common collectible found in the various *The Last Of Us* games.

Joel spots a kid's drawing in the tunnels labelled "Danny, Ish. Our protectors." The same drawing can be found in *The Last Of Us* video game, along with a series of notes detailing their backstory as founders of an underground society.

During the ambush sequence, Team Joel is chased by a snow plough with "RUN" painted on its scoop; this was inspired by a pimped Humvee in the game, which has a "RUN" sign on the front bumper.



FAST FACT

THE SONG OVER THE END CREDITS IS A COVER OF NEW ORDER'S *TRUE FAITH* BY LOTTE KESTNER. A TRAILER FOR THE GAME *THE LAST OF US PART II* FEATURED ASHLEY JOHNSON IN-CHARACTER AS ELLIE SINGING HER OWN VERSION OF KESTNER'S TAKE ON THE SONG.

"When we ran and the truck was chasing us, the running scene was really fun 'cause I was running as fast as I could," Keivonn Montreal Woodard (Sam) told *Entertainment Weekly*.

Woodard turned out to be the episode's other major talking point. A deaf, nine-year-old actor at the time of filming, he turned out to be quite a find, much to Mazin's relief, who was expecting to receive about 80 audition requests for the role, but got just five. Luckily, Woodard was one of them.

Mazin decided to make Sam younger than in the game and also deaf (he wasn't in the game) to differentiate the dynamic of his relationship with his brother from the relationship between Ellie and Joel. He was also influenced by TV show *This Close*, written by and starring deaf creators Shoshannah Stern and Joshua Feldman, as he was friendly with Shoshannah. "So I thought, 'What if Sam was deaf?' It automatically brings a certain kind of intimacy to those scenes because they're quiet, which I love. This is a very verbal show, and Ellie talks a lot, and it was interesting to sort of see what would it be like if it were quieter."

And Druckmann's reaction to this change in the character he created? "Basically, I believe I said, 'You motherfucker – I wish I had thought of that,'" he admitted on the podcast. ■

FEATURE BY DAVE GOLDER; IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

Fallen for Pedro?

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COULD THE LAST OF US ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

A FUNGAL INFLECTIONAL CAUSING THE COLLAPSE OF SOCIETY? HOW PLAUSIBLE IS THE PREMISE OF *THE LAST OF US* EXACTLY? RICHARD EDWARDS GOES IN SEARCH OF THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE SERIES' DEVASTATING PANDEMIC...

The Last Of Us wastes little time establishing the mechanics of its fungus-spawned zombie outbreak. In the opening scene, a (fictional) 1968 chat show gives epidemiologist Dr Neuman (played by John Hannah) a platform to tell the world about his biggest fear for the future.

He's surprisingly blasé about the potential viral pandemic outlined by another guest on the show. "Mankind has been at war with the virus from the start," Neuman counters. "Sometimes millions of people die, as in an actual war, but in the end we always win."

Instead, it's the threat of a global fungal outbreak that's keeping Neuman awake at night – and his nightmares go way beyond an invasion of militant athlete's foot. His apocalyptic visions describe a fungus (see *Spore Things*, overleaf) that can take control of an ant's mind – "like a puppeteer with a marionette" – as it devours its host from within. He subsequently talks of a future where the human race is enslaved by the fungus's biological imperative to spread its spores, before concluding that no treatments or cures exist to combat such an outbreak. It sounds like pure science-fiction – and, for the most part it's just as fanciful as the experimental viruses, mutated mad cow disease, and (maybe) alien space probes that trigger zombie outbreaks in *28 Days Later*, *Zombieland* and *Night Of The Living Dead*, respectively. Even so, the Cordyceps pandemic that brings the human race to its knees in *The Last Of Us* is also based on a surprising amount of science fact.

Indeed, if you're an ant, spider or other arthropod, mind-controlling fungi are already body horror made disgustingly real. "There are two big groups of fungi that do this," explains mycologist Lee Davies, Fungarium Collections Manager at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew. "There's the Cordyceps and the Ophiocordyceps, they're very closely related and there's probably thousands of different species. They invade the body of a host, eat the insides and kill them. In some cases, particularly with ants, they've evolved this ability to manipulate the behaviour of the host, so the ant will leave the nest, climb up a tree or something [the higher vantage point improves their blast radius], and they'll hang on while the fungus finishes eating the rest of its insides out. Then the fungus has got enough energy to produce a mini-mushroom that will burst out of the head or body, and spread billions of spores."

For the fungus the motivation is as simple as "eating and having babies", but – as in *The Last Of Us* – this gruesome invasion is a death sentence for the unfortunate host. The analogy Dr Neuman uses to compare the fungus to a "puppeteer" is also surprisingly accurate.

"It's not far off," confirms Davies. "There's a lot of chemical signalling going on. In some ant species that climb trees and then bite on, the fungus is in the jaw muscles, triggering them to contract – it's kind of puppeting the jaws, as well as there being this chemical manipulation to make them climb up the tree. There's a lot we don't know – we know the fungus is doing it but we're not entirely sure how."

In his intro, Dr Neuman suggests that the killer fungi's chemical influence may stretch even further, preventing decomposition with an antibiotic effect akin to penicillin. Although Davies says it's hard to say whether this particular move is part of Cordyceps' or Ophiocordyceps' hideous box of tricks, he says there are definitely other fungi capable of interfering with a host's physiology.

"There's another species of fungus that infects cicadas in the northern US," he explains. "It's eating the body but it doesn't want to kill its host straight away, so it's releasing things like amphetamines and hallucinogens into the cicada. You have these cicadas who are off their face on drugs and are still alive, even though their body's completely hollowed out. That's exactly what the fungus wants, because the longer these things are alive, the more they're flying around and spreading spores."

Cordyceps is clearly bad news if you've got six legs or more, but should Homo sapiens be worried about similar fungi jockeying for control of their own cerebral cortex?

"We have a lot more complex immune systems [compared to insects] to deal with these things," Davies reassures us. "And we know that these fungi have been parasitising these insects for about 60-65 million years, because there are fossilised ants in amber with Cordyceps fungi on them. These relationships have been going on for so long that there's probably a huge element of co-evolution with their hosts."

Dr Neuman explains the possibilities of a fungal pandemic.

Dr Neuman's chat show sidekick also points out that Cordyceps can't survive if its host's internal temperature is above 34°C/94°F – a few degrees lower than a human. Neuman concedes this to be true, before dropping a bombshell heavily loaded with hindsight. "What if, for instance, the world were to get slightly warmer?"

"There are millions of species of fungi that haven't been identified because they mostly don't affect humans, and that's because of the temperature differential," says Justin Beardsley, associate professor at Sydney University's Infectious Diseases Institute. "There's actually a theory that mammals evolved as hot-blooded organisms to avoid all the fungal pathogens in the world after a meteor hit the Earth, all the plants died and lots of decaying matter led to a massive global fungal bloom. It's been a great survival strategy for 65 million years.

"But over time fungi have adapted and some have managed to adapt to higher body temperatures. There's a new-ish fungal pathogen called Candida auris that emerged in 2009, and suddenly was all over the world. It was in the environment before but wasn't causing human infections, and one of the leading theories as to how that happened is that gradually increasing global temperatures has brought its niche – which seems to be salty marshes – closer to mammalian body temperature."

And Dr Neuman isn't exaggerating when he says we should be concerned about the possibility of a fungal pandemic.

"In my view a fungal pandemic is highly plausible," says Beardsley. "There are lots of precedents, although so far not in humans. The predominant banana crop of the '50s and '60s was the Gros Michel and it doesn't exist anymore because it was made extinct by a fungal pathogen. Also, fungal pathogens as a group kill more people than malaria and almost as many as tuberculosis. They're obviously a huge problem, but they haven't received as much attention [as bacteria and viruses] and they don't get as much funding for research."

Fungal infections are also notoriously difficult to treat, for numerous reasons. Firstly, fungi are eukaryotic, meaning they're comprised of complex cells (like us) – this makes it hard to find drugs that target the fungus without harming us, too. Antifungal

SPORE THINGS

WHAT IS A FUNGUS?

Fungus is a broad term that comprises everything from the mushrooms in your spag bol to yeast, mould and penicillin. They do all have one thing in common, however. "What sets the kingdom of fungi apart is that they all have a cell wall that's made of this stuff called chitin," says Lee Davies of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. "Chitin's the same stuff that insects make their exoskeleton out of. People used to think fungi were like a lower form of plants – a bit like mosses and liverworts – but they're actually very distinct. In fact, fungi and animals are more closely related to each other than either group is to plants."

IMAGES GETTY, SKY

BREAKING THE MOULD

OTHER MAJOR STARRING ROLES FOR FUNGI IN POP CULTURE

TOAD

Super Mario Bros

Significantly cuter than the Infected in *The Last Of Us*, Toad has been at Mario and Luigi's side for four decades. He belongs to a race of talking mushroom people, is part of Princess Peach's entourage, and is surprisingly handy in a go-kart.

SILICON-BASED OPHIOCORDYCEPS

The X-Files

In season two episode *Firewalker*, Mulder and Scully investigate a series of deaths at a volcanic research base. It turns out some unfortunate scientists have uncovered a silicon-based fungus that manipulates its hosts into spreading its spores. Ick.

MAGIC MUSHROOMS

The Hallow

In this Ireland-set horror, a scientist gets more than he bargained for when he takes a sample of a freaky fungus, inadvertently opening the door to a world of malevolent fairies and banshees. The lesson? He should have listened to the warnings of those concerned villagers…

MELANIE

The Girl With All The Gifts

Much like *The Last Of Us*, the movie adaptation of MR Carey's novel features a zombie outbreak caused by fungal infection. Young Melanie is the eponymous "girl with all the gifts", a human/zombie hybrid whose DNA may just hold the key to the future of the human race.

THE MYCELIAL NETWORK

Star Trek: Discovery

The USS Discovery quite literally runs on fungus. Its experimental spore drive taps into the mycelial network, a vast tapestry of fungal roots spanning the entire Milky Way that allows the ship to travel anywhere in the galaxy in an instant. Convenient.

FUNGI TALK

CAN FUNGI REALLY COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER FUNGI?

In *The Last Of Us*, the Infected communicate via a network of underground fungal tendrils. It's an idea that stretches real-life science close to breaking point – even though there's a smidgen of fact buried deep, deep down. "I think I can see where they've gone with the whole communicating thing," says Davies. "It's a different kind of fungus, but in the soil you have mycorrhizal fungi which form symbiotic relationships with plants. The fungus in the soil grows into the roots of the plant, and they feed and support each other in a fully mutualistic relationship. You do have situations where multiple plants are connected to the same fungus, so you get nutrient sharing between plants, using the fungus as a network. It's a very passive process, though. If a tree is under attack, diseased or stressed, it will release defence compounds, which can diffuse through the fungus into neighbouring plants, which detect them and start to produce their own as a defence. But it's less like they're telling their neighbours, than [they're] eavesdropping and hearing their screams.

"I think the whole 'wood wide web' thing has been kind of sexed up to make it out to be that everything's talking," he adds, "and I think that's what they've drawn from. That wouldn't happen. When an insect gets infected, it's a very discrete unit – the fungus is inside its host, eating away, and there's no mycelium [roots] outside of the organism that others can connect to. This one's a huge creative licence!"

medications are also limited, they have a tendency to interact with other treatments, and there's an increasing problem with fungi developing resistance. Also, Beardsley explains, "There are no current vaccines (though we seem to be getting closer to a vaccine to candida)," while prevention is a significant challenge. "These organisms are just ubiquitous in the environment, meaning you can't avoid being exposed to them."

So what are Beardsley's biggest concerns in the rapidly multiplying petri dish of fungi?

"I think the biggest risk is that the organisms we know already and are everywhere just stop responding to the medications we use," he explains. "That's partly through us using them in healthcare but also, that same limited number of antifungal drugs is also used in industry and agriculture. The whole environment is getting contaminated with these antifungals, which means fungi have a constant opportunity to learn how to overcome them.

"And I think the unknown unknowns are also really alarming," he adds. "There are millions of species we haven't identified yet, and with climate change and human exposures to different environmental niches, it's also possible that something we have no idea about could emerge and be the next pandemic. It may be less likely but it could be even worse because we wouldn't even have the first clue of how to respond."

Fungi have been on planet Earth significantly longer than we have, and they may still have the last word… ■

HAVE PUN, WILL TRAVEL

ONE OF ELLIE'S MOST PRIZED POSSESSIONS, THE BOOK *NO PUN INTENDED* FEATURES PROMINENTLY IN *THE LAST OF US*, OFFERING UP SOME TRULY GROAN-WORTHY JEU DE MOTS. HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES…

OH NO! NOT AN UDDER ONE!!
NO PUN INTENDED
VOLUME TOO
THESE PUNS QUACK ME UP!
WILL LIVINGSTON

NO PUN INTENDED

"No no, wait, there's another one. No you'll love this one!"

"It doesn't matter
how much you push
the envelope.
It'll still be stationary."

"What did the mermaid
wear to her math class?
An algae bra."

"Why did the
scarecrow get an award?
*Because he was
outstanding in his field."*

"People are making
apocalypse jokes
like there's no tomorrow."

"How does a
computer get drunk?
It takes screenshots."

"What did the triangle
say to the circle?
You're so pointless."

"Diarrhoea is hereditary...
It runs in your genes."

"A moon rock
tastes better than
an Earth rock.
Why? Because it's meteor."

"What did the
green grape
say to the purple grape?
Breathe, you idiot."

"I stayed up all
night wondering
where the sun went.
*And then it
dawned on me."*

IMAGES SKY

EPISODE 6

KIN

AFTER THE VIOLENCE OF THE PREVIOUS EPISODE, JOEL FINALLY GETS SOME FAMILY TIME… BY MILES HAMER

THE INFO

Broadcast: 19 February 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Jasmila Žbanić

GUEST CAST

Gabriel Luna as Tommy
Rutina Wesley as Maria
Nico Parker as Sarah
Graham Greene as Marlon
Elaine Miles as Florence

THE STORY

Three months after witnessing Henry's suicide, Joel and Ellie arrive at the safe haven of Jackson, finally reuniting Joel with long-lost brother Tommy. Joel asks Tommy to accompany him and Ellie to Colorado to meet with the Fireflies, but Tommy declines, revealing his wife Maria to be pregnant. Ellie learns of Sarah, Joel's deceased daughter, which triggers an argument between the two. Joel fears his ailing health may not protect Ellie, but she insists he is the right person to keep her safe. As the pair make their way to Salt Lake City, Joel is stabbed by a raider and falls from his horse, badly wounded…

THE INSIDE SKINNY

Following the action-packed chest thump of the previous two episodes, the show slows down for something of a wintry breather. Setting the plot three months after the tragedy of Henry's suicide puts clear blue water between those shocking events and the more leisurely-paced, almost Tolkienesque countryside trekking of this episode's early scenes. As writer Craig Mazin explained on the show's official HBO podcast, "Joel and Ellie are not still in direct mourning over what happened."

The tonal shift allows the viewers to see how the characters have grown in each other's company, a development that will come to a pivotal crescendo later on in the episode. And how better to highlight Joel's growing paternal instinct for Ellie than showing the physical effects of his inner turmoil? The character's panic attack was embraced by an empathic internet, and the moment became a 'relatable' meme, repackaged and reposted across social media for days after the show went out.

But of course, the real star of the show is the magnificent community

FAST FACT
THE FILM PLAYING ON MOVIE NIGHT IS *THE GOODBYE GIRL* STARRING RICHARD DREYFUSS AND MARSHA MASON. WRITER CRAIG MAZIN CHOSE IT SPECIFICALLY BECAUSE OF THE MOVIE'S PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP.

GOOFS

As Ellie pets horse Shimmer, the clearly visible fingers of a horse wrangler pop up from the barn door to steer the nag's head towards the character.

of Jackson. Standing in the rocky mountains of Wyoming (in reality, Canmore in Alberta, Canada), and fortified by a wooden perimeter, the Old West style settlement is a symbol of hope in the show, as well as an astonishing achievement of the production team.

Redressing Canmore to appear as the sanctuary was no easy task, especially given it's also a busy, functioning town. The crew had to navigate shooting between the demands of the show and a population still trying to get on with their day. (Hey, it doesn't matter if a multimillion dollar production is in town if you need to sort out that loan at the bank.) Greenhouses, facades, stables, a paddock complete with livestock and faux railway tracks were added by the team to match the game's frontier aesthetic.

It's the first time the series has portrayed a successful community since the outbreak. (You could argue for Bill and Frank, but there were only the two of them.) The striving through adversity was especially important to director Jasmila Žbanić. The Bosnian national called on her own experiences living through the incredibly real conflict of the Sarajevo war of the 1990s. As she explained to *Variety*, "We had to be on alert, we had to survive, we had to learn how to live without anything, without civilisation. There was no electricity, no food, nothing. But we managed to survive because of solidarity, and the way the city was restructured. You have to start from zero. That experience for me was something that I felt very close about Jackson. It's a community that functions, and I find it really beautiful and hopeful because I really believe even in the worst catastrophes, like war, I survived."

Žbanić's sense of positivity is baked into the Jackson scenes, with the movie nights, Christmas trees and decorations that adorn the buildings all presenting a township that has learned to survive through the grisliness. As Ellie so succinctly and perfectly sums it up, "This place actually fucking works."

That much of the episode is set in a safe retreat, where Joel's vulnerabilities as protector are exposed and questioned, is both cruel irony and no accident.

"Joel just feels that he needs to save everyone around him," explained co-creator Neil

FAST FACT
SALLY RIDE, ELLIE'S FAVOURITE NASA ASTRONAUT, WAS NOT ONLY THE FIRST AMERICAN WOMAN IN SPACE, BUT ALSO THE FIRST MEMBER OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY UP THERE TOO!

STAR TURN

PEDRO PASCAL AS JOEL

Pedro Pascal's mercurial take as the conflicted Joel is an astonishing journey that runs the entire gamut of human emotions in under an hour. Conveying fear, anger, grief, relief and small glimpses of joy, the actor's eyes dance with menace, then cower in terror within a nanosecond. Small wonder then that he was nominated for a Lead Actor Emmy for this episode. He may have lost to Kieran Culkin for *Succession*, but his well-stocked trophy cabinet creaks with an abundance of gold, including MTV gongs, a People's Choice Award and a SAG statuette.

BEST LINE

"Everybody I have cared for has either died or left me. Everybody fucking except for you! So don't tell me that I'd be safer with somebody else, because the truth is I would just be more scared." *(Ellie)*

Druckmann on the official HBO YouTube channel. "He thinks he needs to go save his brother. Then he arrives in Jackson. Not only does he not need to save his brother, but his brother is thriving."

In other words, it's the perfect backdrop for the combative heart-to-heart between the two leads where both finally say the previously unsayable.

"Ellie doesn't make relationships easily. Mainly because the relationships she has built have been cruelly taken away from her. That's where Joel and her are the same," observed Ellie actor Bella Ramsey in a behind-the-scenes video.

The crucial confrontation that eventually cements their relationship is both a key moment and fan favourite from the game. As such, the producers sought to recreate it as faithfully as possible for television. The wallpaper,

EASTER EGGS

Nineteen and a half minutes into the episode, Ellie calls out a girl staring at her whilst eating. The girl bears a striking resemblance to *The Last Of Us Part II* character Dina. (A different actor has since been cast in the role for season two, however.)

Joel and Ellie's short stop at the foot of a dam is a nod to said structure from the first game, where Joel was first reunited with Tommy and his wife Maria.

Although seen here for the first time, over on the PlayStation faithful horse Shimmer doesn't show up until the game's sequel.

clothing, props, shots and most of the dialogue remain as they were for the 2013 PlayStation original. It almost makes those familiar with the material want to pick up a pad and caress the X button as the scene plays out.

That said, there is one notable difference for fans of the game. A celebrated line didn't make the translation across to HBO. Joel's warning to Ellie to not mention Sarah, "You are treading on some mighty thin ice here", didn't make the script. As series co-creator Neil Druckmann explained on the podcast, "This Joel's a little bit different. His dialect is a little bit different. If that line stayed there it would have stood out in a way that would have taken away from this version of the scene." Instead, Pedro Pascal's Joel delivers a heart-wrenching plea: just a simple

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

FAST FACT
JOEL'S ADMISSION THAT HE WANTED TO BE A SINGER CAME FROM GAME ACTOR TROY BAKER'S SINGING AND GUITAR PLAYING, WHICH WOUND UP IN THE ORIGINAL GAME.

"Don't". It's a line every bit as powerful as it is economical.

"They made it their own, and it was just as beautiful," commented Druckmann.

The pair's ensuing bonding journey of closeness and protection doesn't last long however. They barely even get to enjoy the lab monkeys at the University of Eastern Colorado before Joel receives a vicious stab wound.

As Joel's life hangs in the balance, and Ellie tries desperately to get him to safety, the episode plays out with a repeat of the Depeche Mode song featured at the end of episode one, *Never Let Me Down Again*, bookending the journey the couple have been on since that first uneasy alliance.

The difference this time is that it's a cover, sung by none other than writer Craig Mazin's daughter, Jessie, a professional singer with over 30,000 Spotify followers. Her dad sent her the original track and asked her to, "do a cover of this that is haunting and slow and about a daughter mourning the loss of her father. Just have that in your mind as you do it." With a sequence as tender and haunting as the series gets, and nearly four million plays on Spotify alone, we'd say she just about managed it. ■

EVERY 26 SEPTEMBER, FANS ARE TREATED TO A WEALTH OF TREATS FROM NAUGHTY DOG AS THE GAMING COMPANY CELEBRATES *THE LAST OF US* DAY…

A DAY TO REMEMBER

What were you doing on 26 September 2013? The likelihood is, you don't remember. In real life, it was, in media terms, a slow news day – there was an internet shutdown in Sudan, the UN held an event in New York to target the illegal wildlife trade and in Britain, at the Labour Party conference, Ed Miliband announced plans to freeze energy prices for 20 months if elected in 2015. Yes, it really was that exciting.

That was what *actually* happened. In the world of *The Last Of Us*, however – the video game, that is – this was when the world changed. Known to fans as Outbreak Day, it's the moment the Cordyceps brain infection reached critical mass (changed to 26 September 2003 – the day, fact fans, that *Doctor Who*'s return was announced by the BBC – in the TV show). If it had happened in real life, it wouldn't necessarily be a day you'd mark for commemoration, but given it's fictional, it's a date that's very important to *The Last Of Us* fans, and certainly to game developer Naughty Dog. Initiated in 2013 as Outbreak Day (it was changed to *The Last Of Us* Day in 2020, post-Covid), each year they've marked the moment in a unique and memorable way. Here's a guide to every *The Last Of Us* Day since its inception…

2013

On the first Outbreak Day, Naughty Dog asked fans on Twitter to describe how they'd survive the Cordyceps infection if it were real, using the hashtag #OutbreakDay. They also released behind-the-scenes footage of the musical 'alternate ending' complete with commentary from co-creator Neil Druckmann.

THE LAST OF US

2014

For 2014, Naughty Dog announced the winners of a contest in which fans were encouraged to submit pictures taken in the game's Photo Mode, which allows players to freeze the game's action and adjust the camera's settings to create a unique shot. They also unveiled a limited edition Clicker statue, hand-sculpted by VFX artist Vincent Van Dyke, available for $150.

2015

For Outbreak Day #3, Naughty Dog revealed another Clicker statue, this time designed by Gaming Heads. They also announced a global PSN sale on select *The Last Of Us* content, and a new PS4 dynamic theme was made available for a limited time for 99 cents.

NAUGHTY DOG, SONY

THE LAST OF US PART II
COVERS AND RARITIES

THE LAST OF US
OUTBREAK DAY
THE LAST OF US PART II
THE LAST OF US PART II POSTER BY KEVIN TONG
THE LAST OF US PART II T-SHIRT
THE LAST OF US PART II PS4 THEME

2016

In 2016, a few lucky fans were able to get their hands on a limited edition *TLOU* poster, hand-numbered and signed by artist Kevin Tong. Additionally, Naughty Dog ran a week-long sale on the PlayStation Store.

2017

To commemorate the fifth annual Outbreak Day there was another limited edition poster (again designed by Kevin Tong), this time based around sequel game *The Last Of Us Part II*. There was also a new PS4 dynamic theme (and t-shirt!) and the by-now customary sales week at the PlayStation Store.

THE ART OF
THE LAST OF US PART II

2018

Another year, another limited edition poster, but this time designed by artist Sam Wolfe Connelly. Naughty Dog also re-released the original *TLOU* soundtrack album on vinyl (at $35 a pop), while unveiling a new set of *The Last Of Us Part II* wallpapers. And that wasn't all – a new theme song from *Part II* titled *The Last Of Us (Cycles)* by Gustavo Santaolalla was released digitally and a new dynamic system theme for PS4 and a collection of PS4 avatars were made available for free. Lastly, Coin Clothing released a new t-shirt design featuring Ellie's tattoo from the second game.

2019

The last official Outbreak Day (before it was renamed) gave fans much to feast on – there was, of course, the sale (50% off!), but also new free PS4 system theme titled *The Last Of Us Part II Grunge Theme*, a *Part II* Ellie Cosplay Guide (featuring HD renders and insights about her character design), and a limited edition Ellie statue. There was also the announcement of a new art book (*The Art Of The Last of Us Part II*).

2020

For the newly-christened *The Last Of Us* Day 2020, Naughty Dog offered up a fresh PS4 system theme, an Abby cosplay guide and a set of 10 *The Last of Us Part II*-inspired GIFs, plus – in collaboration with Mondo, Gaming Heads, Mamegyorai, Kojima Productions, CMON and Graph – new posters, statues and other merch.

2021

This year, Naughty Dog released an EP on vinyl and digital titled *The Last Of Us Part II: Covers And Rarities* (featuring acoustic covers from the game's pre-release marketing and the game itself), a Joel statue courtesy of Dark Horse, and a tantalising peek at HBO's yet-to-be-screened TV adaptation, depicting Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey looking at a plane crash.

2022

With the TV series mere months away at this point, HBO released an official teaser trailer, while Naughty Dog – less excitingly, it must be said – unveiled a new GIF, new wallpaper and a Photo Mode community album, as well as various new merch available from the PlayStation Gear Store.

2023

Among the items offered to fans in 2023 was various new merchandise, including a replica of Ellie's backpack, key art poster, plus new apparel and accessories. Additionally, '90s grunge band Pearl Jam (who feature in *Part II*) collaborated with Naughty Dog on a special edition Clicker Halloween t-shirt.

2024

For 2024's *The Last Of Us* Day, HBO gave fans their first tease of the hotly-anticipated season two with a brand new trailer. Naughty Dog, meanwhile, offered up the first *The Last Of Us* game for subscribers of PlayStation Plus. They also unveiled several new collectibles in collaboration with Youtooz, including figures of Joel and an angry looking Clicker, and there was a whole load of new merch from the PlayStation Gear store, such as a Seraphite jacket replica, a Look For The Light t-shirt and a giraffe plushie keychain. ■

13 OF OUR FAVOURITE PEDRO PASCAL QUOTES

THERE ARE FEW CELEBRITIES WHO ARE AS QUOTE-WORTHY AS *THE LAST OF US'* LEAD ACTOR. HERE ARE SOME OF HIS STANDOUT INTERVIEW MOMENTS…

"Think about staring into those steel fucking blue eyes. Brown eyes are great! Chocolate chips! But, you know, that steel blue stare of his. Oh god, I don't mean to make *Zoolander* references while talking about this film."

On being asked if it was easy or difficult for him to act attracted to Ethan Hawke, Flaunt magazine

"I HATE KARAOKE. I DON'T WANT TO SING KARAOKE AND I DON'T WANT TO LISTEN TO PEOPLE SING KARAOKE."

Pedro tells the NME he doesn't like karaoke, 2023

"ON THE STREET, I GET EITHER 'ARE YOU THE RED VIPER?' OR 'ARE YOU JAVIER PEÑA?' IF ANYONE KNOWS MY NAME, THEY PROBABLY GOOGLED ME FIRST"

On people confusing him for his characters in Game Of Thrones and Narcos (Esquire, 2017)

"I'm kind of a sci-fi fan. I was really hooked on the *Battlestar Galactica* series. I think I owned every box set of *Battlestar Galactica*."

On his love of Ronald D Moore's '00s reimagining of the '70s SF classic

"I'M NOT DANGEROUS, BUT I HAVE A SHARP NOSE. I WILL PROBABLY BE PLAYING BAD GUYS FOREVER BECAUSE OF MY FACE."

Talking about his, er, sharp nose (which we love, by the way) to the LA Times, 2017

"The TV stuff means you're getting, in about three to eight days of work, more money than an entire run Off Broadway. And that's not even a lot of money. You want *Law & Order* so badly that you just want to die."

Remembering his time as a struggling actor in 2016, The Columbus Dispatch

"I LIKE MY OWN BURPS JUST LIKE I LIKE MY OWN FARTS UNDER THE SHEETS."

Pedro overshares to Ali Plumb on BBC Radio 1

"She is and has always been one of the most powerful people and personalities I've ever known. My protective side is lethal, but I need her more than she needs me."

Talking about his transgender sister Lux in Esquire, 2023

"I'm the Instagram whore of the entire cast."

On being the Game Of Thrones actor most addicted to social media

"I tried, you know. And then it was only a matter of minutes before I had to hand it over to my nephew. It really takes a specific kind of skill, and I don't have it."

On attempting to play The Last Of Us game. And failing. (GQ, 2022)

"HE'S IN HIS LATE THIRTIES, HE HAD EIGHT DAUGHTERS, HE'S A SLUT, HE'S DANGEROUS. I'M LIKE, THIS IS PERFECT FOR ME!"

Explaining to Seth Meyers how his role as Oberyn Martell in Game Of Thrones was tailor-made for him

"THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I EXPECT FOR ALL MY HARD WORK! I WANT MY FACE TATTOOED ON PEOPLE'S BODIES. PERMANENTLY ON PEOPLE'S BODIES. THAT'S HOW HARD I WORK!"

On what keeps him going, career-wise

"It's so wonderful. I think it's all a spectrum, right? Straight men can have – *do* have – crushes on other men. It doesn't make them gay, it doesn't make them bi. I was super-flattered. The guys that picked on me in middle school in Corona del Mar probably have a crush on me now."

Responding to a question on Reddit about a group for straight men who said they were "Gay For Oberyn" (LA Times, 2017)

EPISODE 7

LEFT BEHIND

A FLASHBACK TO ELLIE'S PAST GIVES US ANOTHER STANDOUT EPISODE, WRITES MILES HAMER…

THE STORY

As Ellie struggles to save Joel's life, he insists she abandons him and save herself. Ellie recalls the events leading up to her being infected. A difficult student at a FEDRA military school, she misses best friend Riley, who has been absent for weeks. Riley returns late one night, confessing to joining the Fireflies. The pair sneak out to an abandoned mall, play video games, ride the carousel and, revealing their true feelings, kiss. Immediately, both are bitten by an infected. A dying Riley suggests they spend the rest of what little time they have left together. In the present, Ellie heeds this advice and gets to sewing Joel's wound.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

Not part of the original game of 2013, *Left Behind* was originally a DLC (downloadable content) expansion released the year after.

Telling the tale of how Ellie was smitten then bitten, the instalment was written in response to fan feedback clamouring for more background on her pre-Joel life. Merely hinted at previously, *Left Behind* was the first explicit depiction of the character as a lesbian.

Showrunners Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann had always intended to incorporate this backstory into the show, but were initially going to make the story standalone, without stitching it into the main storyline. Picking up after the climax of episode six – Joel near death, with Ellie struggling to fight or flight – that cliffhanger was originally going to be unresolved for another week.

A diktat from the upper echelons of HBO changed that, however. As Mazin explained on the show's official podcast, "HBO, in a very smart way, suggested it to us. This wasn't originally the plan. Originally, this episode was gonna play entirely as Ellie's story with Riley. And one of the things that HBO strongly suggested, and they were absolutely right, was to connect it back more to the story at hand, which is how it was in the game."

Used as a narrative drive to propel Ellie towards saving the one person in her life she trusts, the pair took to making the episode as both backstory and allegory.

Adapting the game meant finding someone performance-worthy enough to fill the boots of Yaani King, the original voice actor for Riley. An established character to fans through both the game and spinoff comic (where she was originally introduced) the team knew they had a fearsome casting job on their hands.

As Craig Mazin explained on the show's official YouTube channel, "We had to find somebody that was not only able to be on Bella's level in terms of talent, but also somebody that we think would have the upper hand on Ellie, and that's a tall order."

Chosen as the fledgling Firefly was Storm Reid. Once cast, the actor chose to keep the game at arm's length, letting the scripts and instinct guide her performance. She and Bella Ramsey hit it off immediately, the pair's chemistry bursting through the screen. The teenagers' ebullient glee is a rare moment of joyful relief for the often bleak series.

The writers' tonal inspiration? As Druckmann asks on the HBO youTube channel, "What is it like to skip school in the post-apocalypse?" Craig Mazin concurs, "That's where you sneak away as a teenager. I wanted to see Ellie experiencing what we all took for granted for the first time and how magical it is."

THE INFO

Broadcast:
26 February 2023
Writer: Neil Druckmann
Director:
Liza Johnson

GUEST CAST

Storm Reid as Riley Abel
Terry Chen as Captain Kwong

FAST FACT
DIRECTOR LIZA JOHNSON'S LATEST RELEASE IS SOMETHING OF A TONAL LEFT TURN FROM THE APOCALYPSE: A *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS* SPINOFF FILM, *SAVING BIKINI BOTTOM: THE SANDY CHEEKS MOVIE.*

BEST LINE

"It ends this way for everyone sooner or later, right? Some of us just get there faster than others. But we don't quit. Whether it's two minutes or two days, we don't give that up. I don't wanna give that up. We can just be all poetic and shit and lose our minds together." *(Riley)*

The appeal of the episode lies in that familiar trope seen in many post-apocalyptic dramas – the shopping mall spree. Most famously depicted in George A Romero's seminal *Dawn Of The Dead*, Riley and Ellie's charge around the delights of the mall fulfils the wish list of many a hypothetical pandemic survivor.

Recreating the twinkly allure of an abandoned mall was always going to be a struggle, even on an HBO budget. The team got lucky when they learned of a Calgary shopping centre earmarked for demolition, Northland Village Mall.

Able to redress the condemned building as a fungal-infected disaster zone, the producers purposely toned down the effects of the outbreak, instead highlighting the bright colours and hedonistic sparkle of life before Cordyceps.

Observed by original Joel actor Troy Baker on the podcast, "Transitioning from this broken down decrepit reminder of this failed world and then the remnant of what was wonderful. What I love is Ellie's look of wonderment. There's innocence there."

The mall itself was only a single ground floor shopping centre, with just the one escalator to a small, barely occupied level. As such, large portions of the set had to be recreated digitally on a soundstage, rather than the location. As Ellie stands atop the escalator, taking in the intoxicating logos and retina-scorching LEDs, in reality Bella Ramsey was looking out at a sea of painted blue, reacting to some as-yet unrealised CGI.

The rest was built practically inside the soon-to-be-demolished building. "We got to pick and create these stores," explained production designer John Paino to *Variety*. "It was great to use their logos, and we could play with what they are, the luxury stores and the codes behind them."

One attraction that needed lots of lights and even more quarters was the retro-style video games arcade. Ellie and Riley thump the pixels out of each other in

GOOFS

The mall contains a Thai Express, a popular Canadian fast food outlet. The franchise has just one restaurant in the United States. It's in Minnesota, not Boston.

Most of the American Dolls line of toys on display in the mall weren't manufactured until long after 2003, the date of the show's worldwide Cordyceps outbreak.

STAR TURN

STORM REID AS RILEY

Storm Reid's guest turn as Ellie's first love is, aptly, something of a whirlwind appearance in the show. Her delicate tightrope walk between charisma and confidence makes the character's seduction of, and assertion over, the stubborn Ellie immensely believable. The Black Reel Awards agreed, honouring her with Outstanding Guest Performance in a Drama Series. Reid's first film role at the age of 10 was in award-magnet *12 Years A Slave*. Since then she's undertaken big-budget comic fare in *The Suicide Squad*, and horror sequel *The Nun II*.

FAST FACT

ELLIE'S FLASHLIGHT THWACK IS A SMALL TIP OF THE HAT TO THE VIDEO GAMES, WHERE PLAYERS NEED TO BANG THE SIDE OF THE CONTROLLER TO ACTIVATE THE TORCH.

the smash hit *Mortal Kombat II*, the one-on-one battler replacing fictional fighter *The Turning* from the games. On set, Ramsey and Reid played *Mortal Kombat* for real, each taking joy executing the series' famous fatalities.

As well as a dilapidated food court and arcade, the team were faced with providing a merry-go-round smack bang in the centre of the ground floor. The team sourced and redressed a carousel from Ontario's Spruce Meadows, decorating the central column with mirrors to accentuate the sequence's surrealist dreamy ambience. Listen carefully to the music played and you might just recognise one of The Cure's best-known tunes, *Just Like Heaven*. (A lullaby version taken from an album dedicated to remixes of indie hits for sleeping babies.)

The episode's knife-edge dance between love and terror are what spoke to director Liza Johnson. As she explained to *Salon*, "For me, the real attraction of the story is just the things that are anxiety-producing, but also wonderful, about discovery. And I think it's quite a different tone than much of the series where you experience these discoveries and hints of joy and fear around that joy, reasons

NO PUN INTENDED
VOLUME TWO

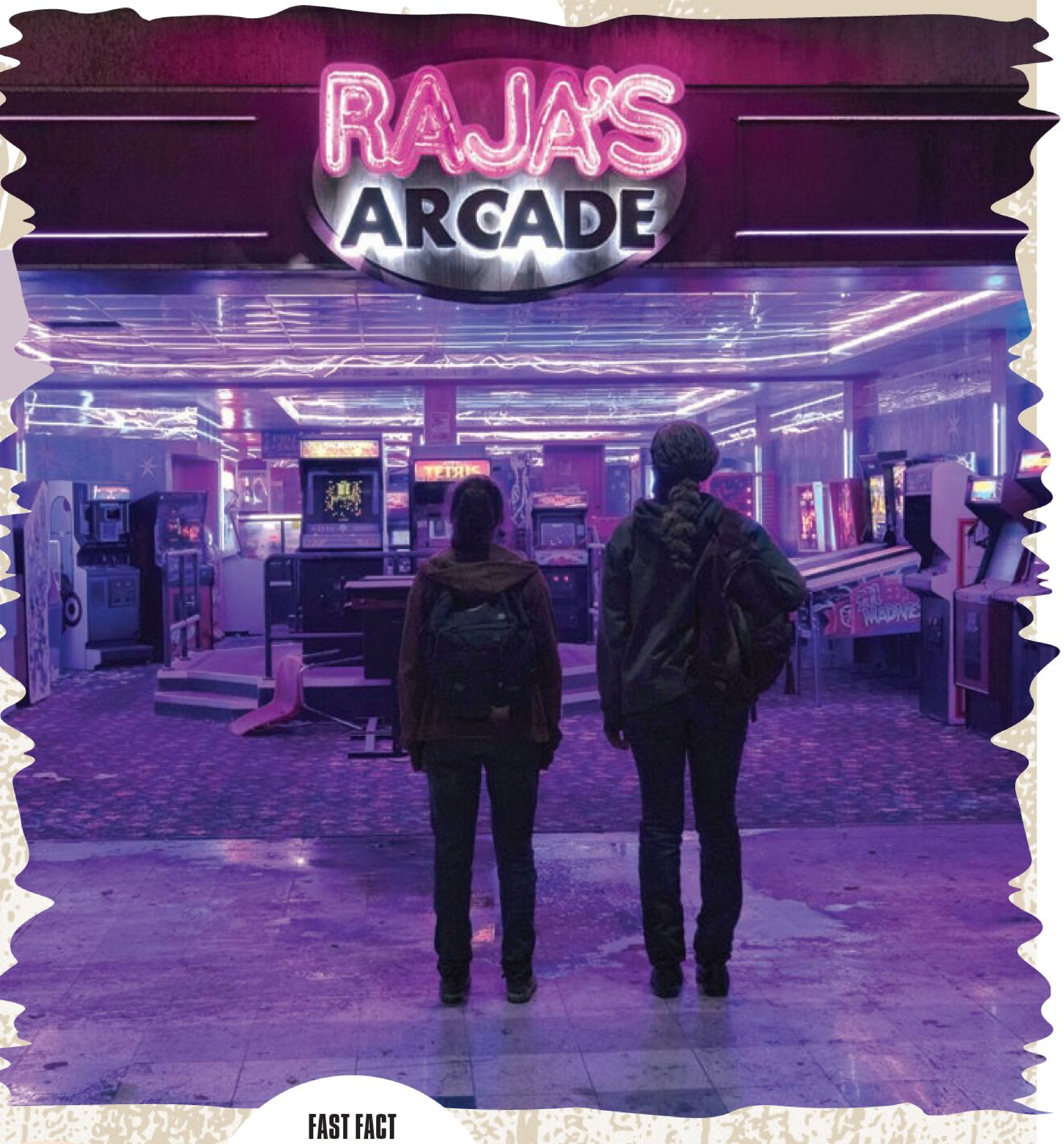
EASTER EGGS

Raja's Arcade is named after Eddy Raja, a villainous character from the *Uncharted* games, produced by *The Last Of Us* developers Naughty Dog.

Ellie's pun book – the one she torments/teases Joel with – can be seen on her bedroom side cabinet.

The use of *Take On Me*, by Norwegian pop legends A-ha, foreshadows a moment from the game's sequel, in which Ellie plays the classic hit on guitar.

The keys that Captain Kwong offers to Ellie in the office have the Naughty Dog paw logo on a fob.



FAST FACT

THE REASON WRITER/ CREATOR NEIL DRUCKMANN KEEPS USING THE MUSIC OF PEARL JAM? THEY'RE HIS NUMBER ONE FAVOURITE BAND.

why you would want to stay alive. So, for me, that was really the throughline, which was to try to hold on to the spirit of discovery."

In an interview for HBO, Bella Ramsey is sanguine about the characters' impossibly short-lived romance. "In that world, to have a crush on someone, it's still a feeling that you can't just turn it off because the apocalypse is going on and you don't think you have a future together. It's something that's still very much there."

But one dance, one kiss, and two infections later, poor Ellie and Riley's worlds come crashing down.

"Ellie gets to experience her first kiss, then we snatch it away from her," Druckmann acknowledges on the episode's YouTube video. But he insists that despite the tragic irony of their short-lived romance, the lasting message is of hope, and love winning out. "Cutting that with Joel when he tells Ellie to 'leave me' and pushes her away, but that memory is ringing in Ellie's ears. And she knows that she's going to fight to the bitter end, 'cos the person she loves most in the world is Joel and she will go to any length to save him." ■

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

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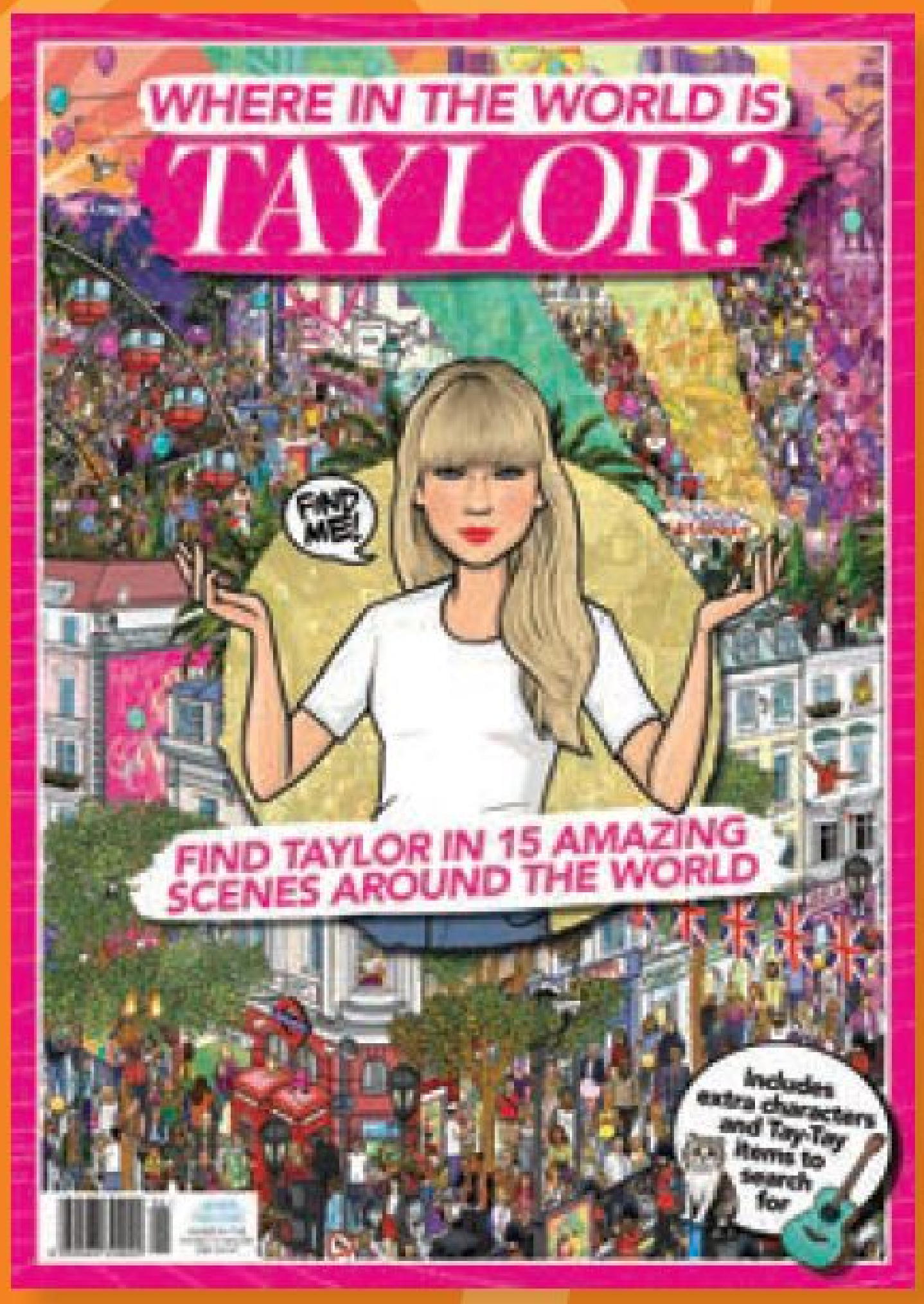
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HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE LAST OF US?

TAKE OUR FIENDISHLY HARD QUIZ TO FIND OUT IF YOU'RE A *LAST OF US* GENIUS OR A *LAST OF US* DUNCE…

1. IN THE ORIGINAL VIDEO GAME, WHAT YEAR DID THE OUTBREAK OCCUR?

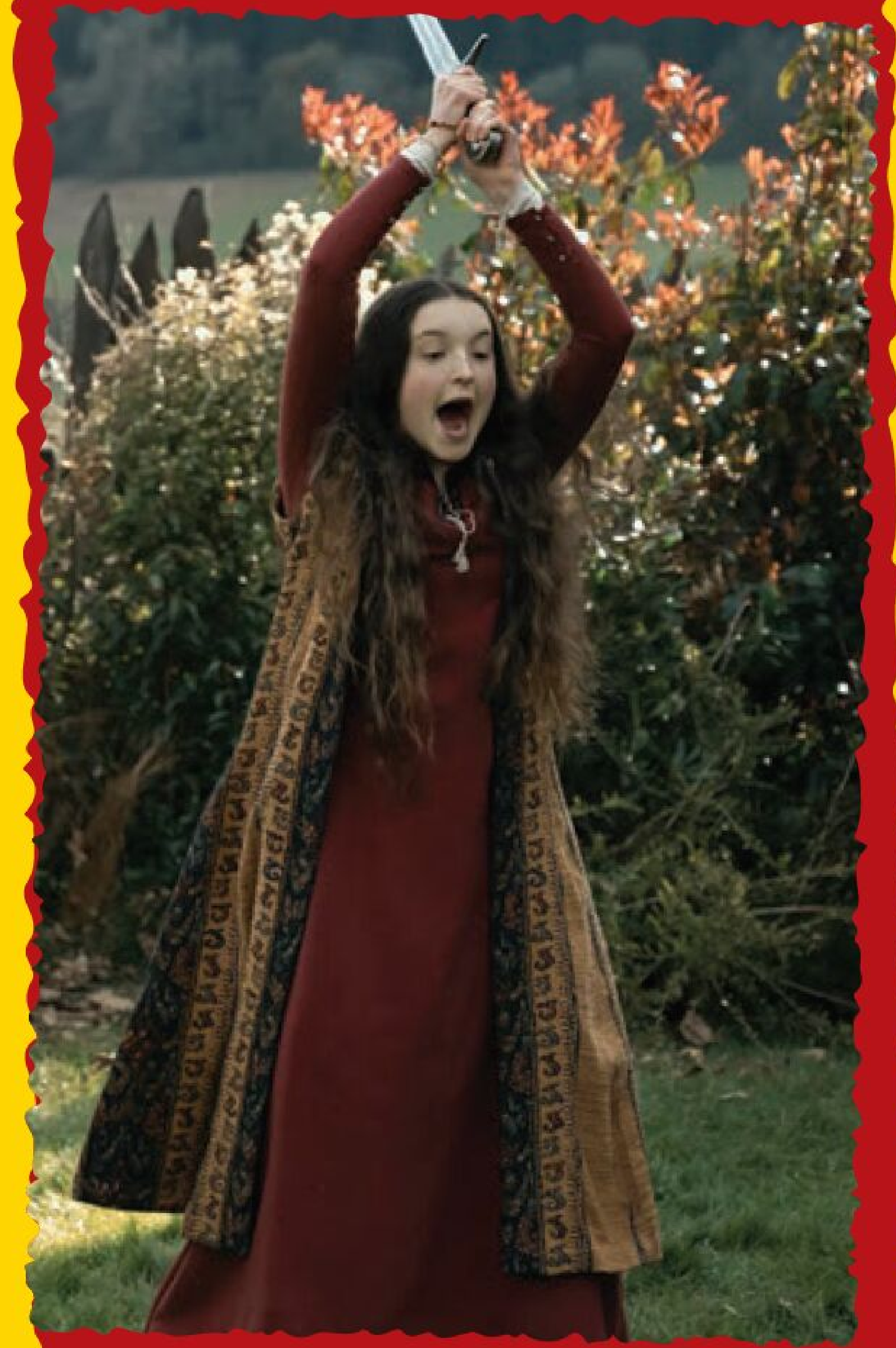
2. IN WHAT AMERICAN CITY IS THE QUARANTINE ZONE WHERE WE FIRST MEET ELLIE?

3. HOW OLD IS JOEL IN THE 2003 SECTION OF THE FIRST EPISODE?

4. IN THE EPISODE *LONG, LONG TIME*, BILL AND FRANK PLAY THE SONG OF THE SAME NAME ON THE PIANO. WHO SANG THE TRACK ORIGINALLY?

5. WHICH CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED HBO SERIES DID SHOWRUNNER CRAIG MAZIN WORK ON BEFORE *THE LAST OF US*?

6. WHAT MOVIE DOES THIS PHOTO OF BELLA RAMSEY COME FROM?



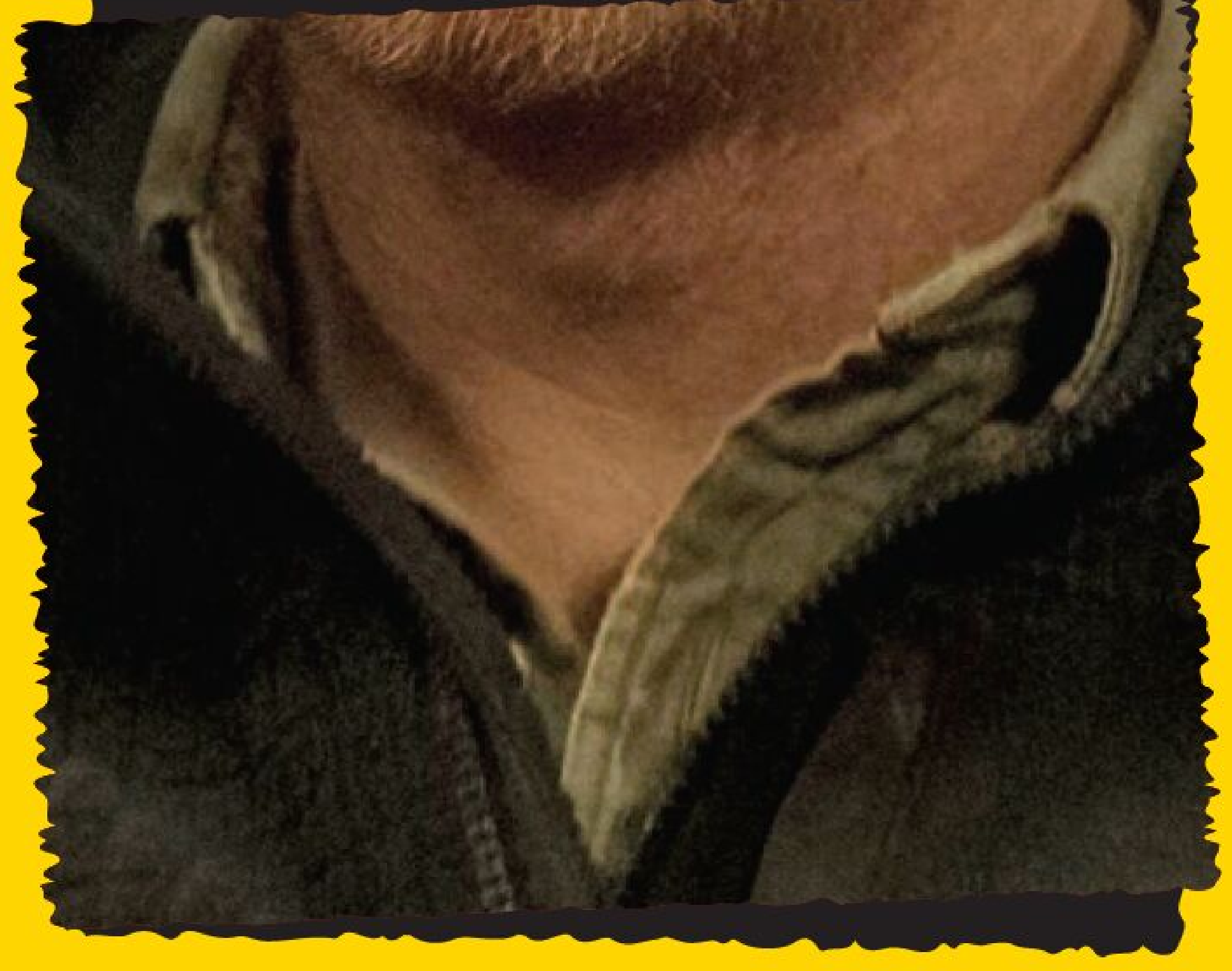
7. IN THE GAME, WHAT IS THE NAME OF THE COMIC BOOK JOEL COLLECTS FOR ELLIE?

8. IN THE FIRST EPISODE OF THE SERIES, WHAT ITEM DOES SARAH GET FIXED FOR HER DAD AS A BIRTHDAY PRESENT?

9. IN *WHEN YOU'RE LOST IN THE DARKNESS*, JOEL AND TESS DO BUSINESS WITH A MAN NAMED ROBERT. WHAT HAD THEY WANTED TO BUY FROM HIM?

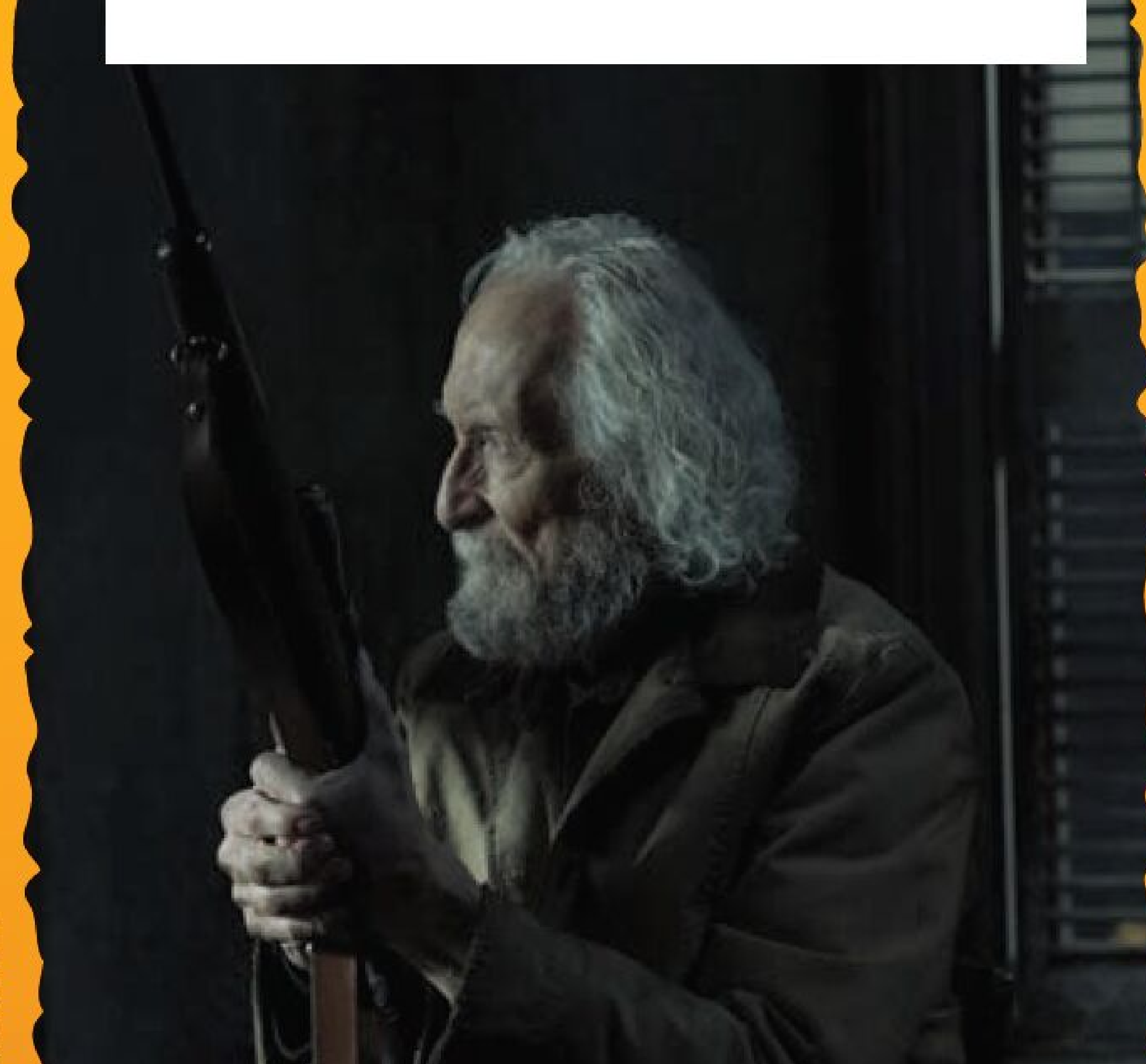
10. AFTER ELLIE ESCAPES FROM A FEDRA MILITARY SCHOOL SHE TAKES ON AN ALIAS. WHAT'S THE NAME SHE CHOOSES?

11. GUESS THE NECK



12. IN DISNEY+ SHOW *THE MANDALORIAN*, WHAT IS THE REAL NAME OF PEDRO PASCAL'S CHARACTER?

13. WHICH EPISODE IS THIS?



QUIZ COMPILED BY STEVE O'BRIEN; PHOTOS SKY, HBO, AMAZON, DISNEY+

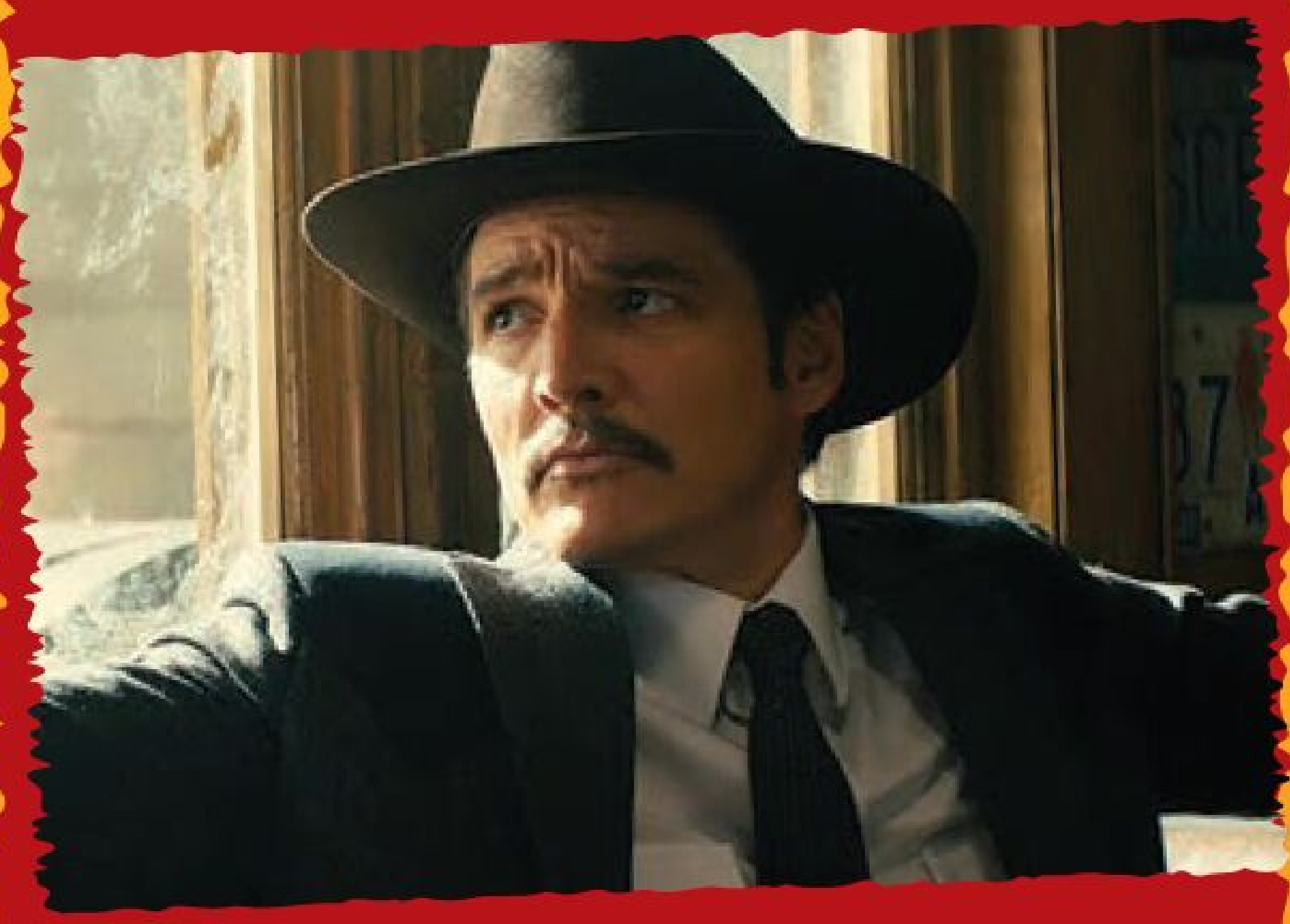
14. WHO COMPOSED THE MUSIC FOR THE GAME AND THE SERIES?

15. IN WHAT MONTH OF 2023 DID *THE LAST OF US* PREMIERE ON HBO?

16. WHAT WAS THE NAME OF BELLA RAMSEY'S CHARACTER IN *GAME OF THRONES*?

17. MELANIE LYNSKEY, WHO PLAYED KATHLEEN COGHLAN IN SEASON ONE, APPEARED OPPOSITE KATE WINSLET IN WHICH PETER JACKSON MOVIE?

18. WHICH FILM IS THIS PHOTO OF PEDRO PASCAL FROM?



19. AFTER GIVING UP BEING A FIREFLY, WHAT CITY IN WYOMING DID TOMMY MOVE TO?

20. ASHLEY JOHNSON, WHO PLAYS ELLIE IN THE VIDEO GAMES, PORTRAYED WHICH CHARACTER IN THE TV SERIES?

HOW DID YOU DO?

16–20

CONGRATULATIONS, YOU CLEARLY KNOW YOUR JOEL MILLER FROM YOUR SIENNA MILLER.

11–15

NOT BAD, NOT BAD. IN FIREFLY TERMS, YOU'D BE A SECOND LIEUTENANT.

6–10

HMM, BETTER BRUSH UP ON SEASON ONE BEFORE YOU START ON SEASON TWO.

0–5

WHAT WERE YOU DOING WHILE SEASON ONE WAS ON? WERE YOU SCROLLING TWITTER AND TIKTOK WHEN YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVING THE TV 100%? SEE US AFTER CLASS.

ANSWERS 1. 2013 **2.** Boston **3.** 36 **4.** Linda Ronstadt **5.** *Chernobyl* **6.** *Catherine Called Birdy* **7.** *Savage Starlight* **8.** A watch **9.** A truck battery **10.** Veronica **11.** David **12.** Din Djarin **13.** Ep 5 *Endure And Survive* **14.** Gustavo Santaolalla **15.** January **16.** Lyanna Mormont **17.** *Heavenly Creatures* **18.** *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* **19.** Jackson **20.** Ellie's mother Anna.

EPISODE 8

WHEN WE ARE IN NEED

AS THE SEASON DRAWS TOWARDS ITS CONCLUSION, THE STAKES ARE GETTING HIGHER FOR JOEL AND ELLIE… BY DAVE GOLDER

THE STORY

With Joel's infected wound not getting any better, Ellie goes out hunting and encounters a religious group of survivors living in an abandoned ski resort. Their leader, David, appears reasonable and gives Ellie meds to help Joel recover. But there's a deeply creepy side to David, who's been secretly feeding his followers human meat, and who's turned on by the darkness he senses in Ellie. When it becomes clear there's no way she's reciprocating those feelings, he decides to make her the next main course instead. But Ellie escapes and brutally stabs him to death in a frenzied attack. Then carries on stabbing some more…

THE INSIDE SKINNY

The last thing you'd think anyone would need when filming in Calgary in the winter is more snow. Especially as one of the main things Bella Ramsey recalled about the episode is that it holds the record for the coldest day of shooting over the entire season: "It was very, very cold. That scene where I meet David and James in the forest – it was minus 17°C," they told *GQ*.

Yet according to local news stories, when the production started prepping locations for *When We Are In Need* just outside the town of Okotoks in early 2022, the crew brought in extra trees, grass and greenery "as well as creating additional snow" (according to *Western Wheel*). As is often the case in the TV and filmmaking business, reality just ain't real enough.

Filming took place in Okotoks in early February before the crew moved on to Waterton Lakes National Park, with both areas standing in for Rocky Mountains in Colorado.

Locals also saw the team set up four house-sized wind machines (used to buffet Pedro Pascal in a mock snow flurry) and a fake horse on rails, which would be used in the scene where Ellie is trying to lead David's henchmen away from Joel.

THE INFO

Broadcast: 5 March 2023
Writer: Craig Mazin
Director: Ali Abbasi

GUEST CAST

Scott Shepherd as David
Troy Baker as James

FAST FACT
MAZIN OPENS THE EPISODE WITH DAVID READING FROM REVELATION 21, AS IT RELATES TO THE NEW WORLD SUCCEEDING THE OLD ONE.

GOOFS

In the scene where David has Ellie locked up in a cage, he offers her a bowl of food. Understandably, she kicks it away and the bowl ends up by the butcher's table. A couple of shots later, though, it's back by the door.

The cold wasn't the only reason Ramsey remembers the episode so vividly. It was also their favourite story of the season, and the second episode in a row in which Ellie takes centre stage.

"It was… exhausting," they told *Vogue*, "but those were some of my favourite days on set. That sounds really masochistic, but it's the scenes that break me that I love the most, in a way."

Ramsey certainly impressed showrunner Craig Mazin, who christened them "my little savage" in the official podcast for their terrifying, animalistic psycho-frenzy at the episode's climax.

The episode is adapted from a section of the original game that threw players a swerve ball, when they suddenly found themselves playing as Ellie instead of Joel (a sequence that Neil Druckmann says helped inspire him to make the game). The episode itself, while featuring some small but significant changes to the story, actually reproduces a surprising amount of dialogue, scenes and locations with fan-pleasing loyalty, with Craig Mazin operating on an if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it policy. The food preparation room where David cages Ellie is nearly identical to the one in the game, and the climax in both versions takes place in Todd's Steakhouse & Bar.

Another thing that wasn't changed from the game was that Joel doesn't come to Ellie's rescue, even if viewers think that's where the episode is heading. "It was important when the sequence was constructed in the game, and I think it's the same for the show, [that] we want the audience or the player to think Joel is going to save Ellie," explained Druckmann in the official podcast. "Because that's what this character traditionally does. And it was important that Ellie saves herself."

But Craig Mazin points out that Joel does save Ellie in one respect – emotionally. It's Joel who brings her out of her fugue state by flinging his arms around her and calling her "baby girl" – which is, as Druckmann says in *Inside The Episode*, "This thing that he hasn't said in twenty years... which is what he called his daughter."

That final embrace, though, did have a slight location change from the game, where it happened inside the Steakhouse. Mazin felt that having the moment take place surrounded by a raging fire (Ellie has accidentally set the place ablaze) wouldn't convey the emotional beat they were aiming for – arguing that fire takes on a different feel in a live-action environment. Also, "there was a question of – how does Joel get inside if the keys are on David? It was, like, a little bit of a logic thing," Mazin added in the official podcast.

According to production designer John Paino, the Steakhouse set was designed to reflect a thematic shift from the game to the TV screen. In the game, it's only hinted at that David's group of survivors are bound together by religion. In the episode it clear that they're all deeply religious from the first scene.

"We built the Steakhouse, which is the meeting place," he told the website *No Film School*. "There was a nod by me to make it somewhat church-like in its symmetry, and where we put his podium. We try to make it feel a little bit like a church, a little bit." He also reveals that the set was intended to evoke a *The Shining* vibe (the snow actually does a good job of that already).

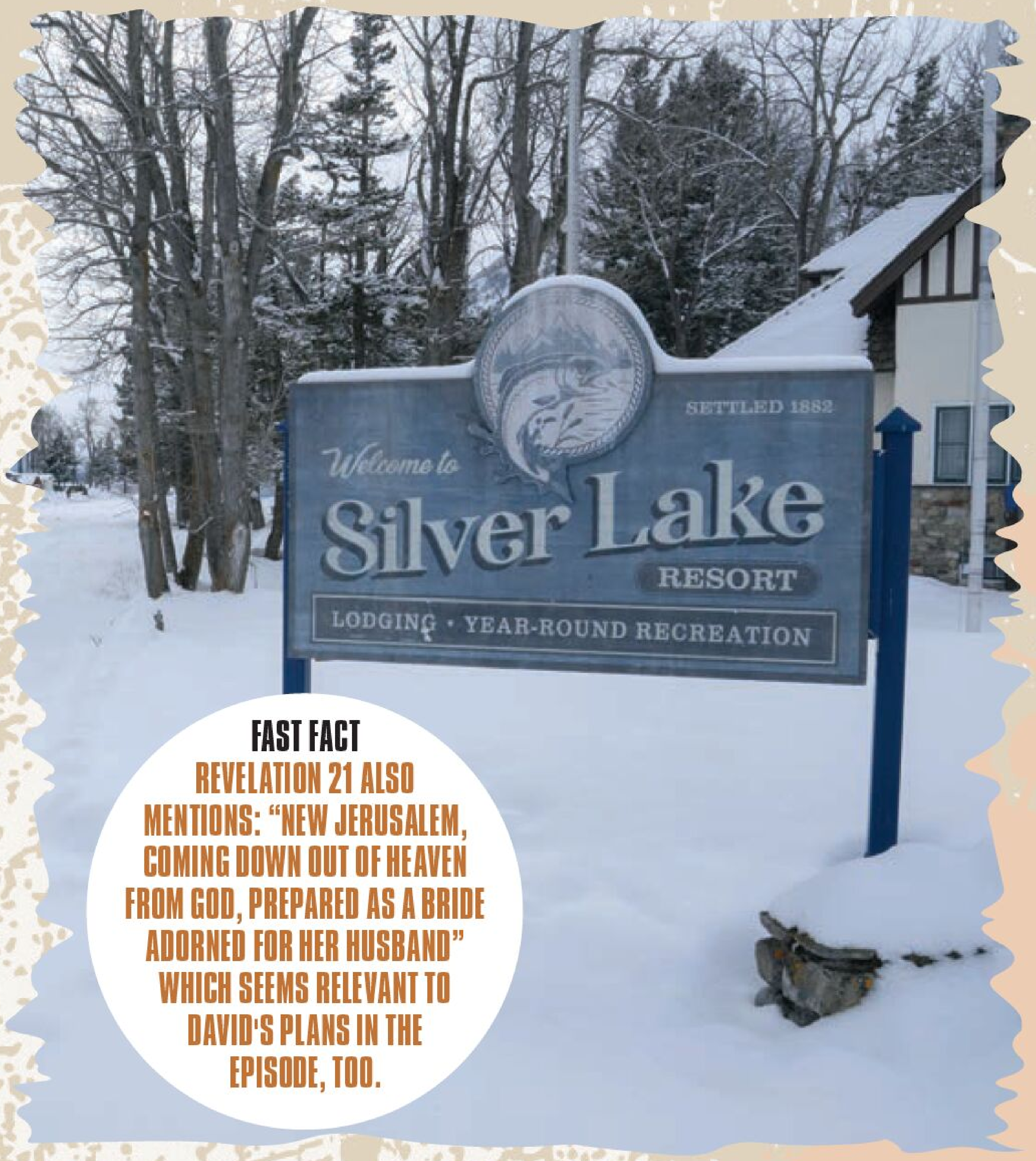
BEST LINE

"Well, I found God after the apocalypse, which is either the best time or the worst time to find Him – hard to say." *(David)*

STAR TURNS

SCOTT SHEPHERD AS DAVID

North Carolina-born Scott Shepherd is given a humdinger of a role as David, and he doesn't disappoint. It's a subtle, nuanced performance that gives the viewer the distinct impression that there's something not quite right about the Preacher long before he reveals his true colours. But even after he does, he's far from a mere ranting loon, with a chilling calmness and self-assurance. Shepherd is a reliable jobbing actor, with a solid theatre background, who you may have seen in films such as *Jason Bourne*, *Bridge Of Spies* and *Killers Of The Flower Moon*, and TV shows such as *True Detective* and *Elementary*.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FAST FACT
REVELATION 21 ALSO MENTIONS: "NEW JERUSALEM, COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN FROM GOD, PREPARED AS A BRIDE ADORNED FOR HER HUSBAND" WHICH SEEMS RELEVANT TO DAVID'S PLANS IN THE EPISODE, TOO.

WHEN WE ARE IN NEED
HE SHALL PROVIDE

Another Kubrick fan on the team (he cites *Barry Lyndon* as an influence on his 2024 Donald Trump biopic *The Apprentice*) is the episode's director, Ali Abbasi. This marks the acclaimed Iranian-Danish filmmaker's first foray into television, after a string of acclaimed foreign language movies including *Shelley* (2016), *Border* (2018) and *Holy Spider* (2022). And he brought an old collaborator with him, cinematographer Nadim

FAST FACT

BELLA RAMSEY RECEIVED AN EMMY NOMINATION FOR LEAD ACTRESS IN A DRAMA SERIES FOR THEIR PERFORMANCE IN THIS EPISODE.

Carlsen, who also worked on those last two films, and for whom *The Last Of Us* was similarly his first work in US TV.

"It was a different experience for us in every way from start to finish," Carlsen told *soundvenue*. "Here it was the American system. That means a lot of people on the team, a lot of VFX, a lot of planning and demanding scenes that involve everything from fire and horses to stunts and firearms. The series has that post-apocalyptic adventure universe, and that means that – unlike what Ali and I have done together before – there is nothing in front of the camera before it is created. They had been filming for a very long time before we arrived. It's a bit of a strange role because you're super important, but you're also the one who knows the least. We're not used to that. There are some decisions that are made right under our noses."

The episode also features a guest appearance from someone very dear to *The Last Of Us* fandom: actor Troy Baker, who voiced Joel in the games. Baker was delighted to be involved in the HBO show, but assumed he'd be playing a Clicker. "So, this is an upgrade!" he told *Deadline*, before also revealing that when he was first offered the role of David's right hand man James, his initial reaction was, "Man, thank you… who's James?" ■

EASTER EGGS

Pittsburgh may have been written out of episode four, replaced by Kansas City, but David gives the Pittsburgh QZ a namecheck here.

"Any sudden moves I put one right between your eyes. Ditto for buddy-boy," is one of Ellie's most iconic lines from the game, reproduced here word-for-word.

The way Ellie kills James (a cleaver to the neck) is almost identical to the same scene in the game.

Joel's interrogation of David's henchmen is also pretty identical.

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

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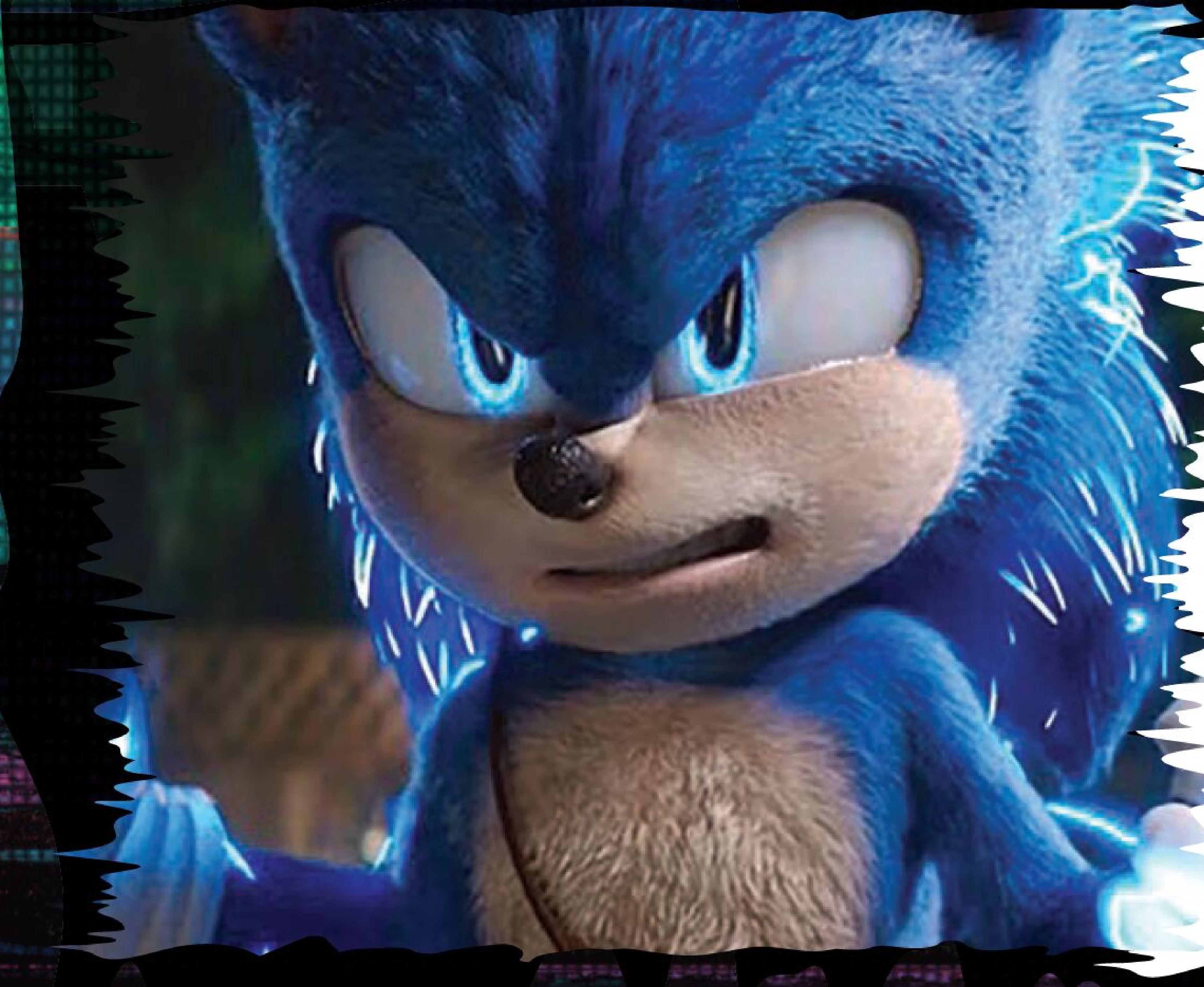
HITMAN: AGENT 47

Film, 2015, directed by Aleksander Bach

THE GAME: IO Interactive's assassin series, featuring the sharp-dressed contract killer, high on ammo and low on hair gel. Including spinoffs, compilations and mobile titles, there's over a dozen games for the player to step into the character's shiny shoes and make targets stop breathing in a variety of fun and grisly ways.

THE FILM: Whilst Timothy Olyphant's 2007 turn as the barcoded baldie may have made impressive bank ($101m against a $24m budget), it was about as warmly received as a snot omelette. So 20th Century Fox hit restart and dusted down the IP for another outing. Made for more but earning less than the previous effort, the critics ferociously mauled its insipid take on the source material. Oh well, at least the guns looked nice.

VERDICT MISS



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Film, 2020, directed by Jeff Fowler

THE GAME: Sega's spiky blue mascot, the speedy Erinaceinae has featured in dozens of platforming games, spawns merch like only a cash-spewing icon can, and is arguably second only to Mario in terms of global recognition.

THE FILM: It almost went so incredibly wrong before the film was even released. A tonally awkward trailer featuring a bizarrely rendered Sonic with piggy eyes and horror teeth straight out of a Blumhouse movie, fan reaction was swift and damning. Paramount panicked, delayed the launch, and painstakingly replaced the nightmare hedgehog with a model much more faithful to the game's original. Now three movies in, with a spinoff series starring Idris Elba, the charming adventures of Sonic and pals are fan catnip and box office dynamite.

VERDICT HIT

STREET FIGHTER

Film, 1994, directed by Steven E de Souza

THE GAME: Capcom's famed fighting series, with its badass roster of diverse talent, tactile mechanics and rousing theme music, has led the beat 'em up genre since its breakout 1991 arcade sequel *The World Warrior.*

THE FILM: A scattergun hodgepodge of borrowed plot and character elements, gracelessly thrown together with strong straight-to-video energy, the film made profit, but left critics and fans severely underwhelmed. Star Jean-Claude Van Damme later admitted to being coked off his bin during shooting, whilst poor Raul Julia suffered from stomach cancer at the time, dying from a stroke shortly before the film's release.

VERDICT MISS

TWISTED METAL

TV series, 2023, Peacock/Paramount+

THE GAME: Sony exclusive vehicle combat series, featuring armed cars, tanks, and, erm, ice-cream trucks. All belt seven shades of stick shift out of each other until a victor emerges.

THE SERIES: A jaunty post-apocalyptic *Mad Max*-style wasteland with a bawdy flippancy and gory, jet black humour, much like its progenitor. With an all-star cast, featuring Captain America Anthony Mackie, *Brooklyn 99*'s Stephanie Beatriz, and iconic fearsome clown Sweet Tooth played by wrestler Samoa Joe with the voice of Will Arnett, it boasts enormous viewing figures and has already earned itself a recommission.

VERDICT HIT

HALO

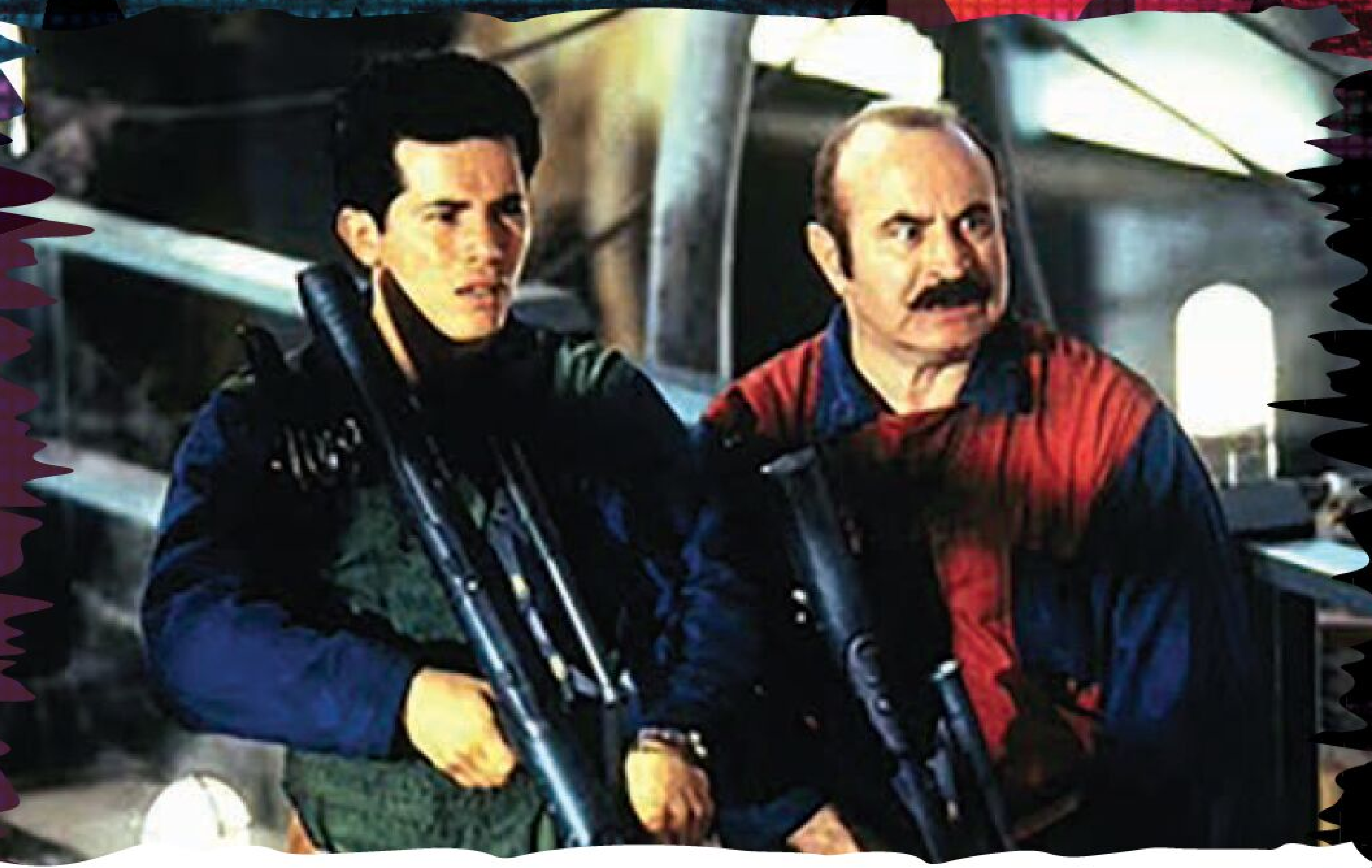
TV series, 2022-2024

Paramount+

THE GAME: Microsoft's signature shooter, featuring green-suited cyber soldiers, spaceships and improbable weaponry. It's become one of the go-to brands of the XBox, exclusive to the console, and a major USP in its marketing arsenal.

THE SERIES: Despite Pablo Schreiber's laudable turn as series' badass Master Chief, and the solid efforts to please fans and casuals alike, the show made little impression, bouncing off the public consciousness no sooner than the credits rolled. Other than a controversial sex scene that even the main actor condemned, it passed by unnoticed, little more than generic sci-fi landfill.

VERDICT MISS



SUPER MARIO BROTHERS (1993)

Film, 1993, directed by Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel

THE GAME: Seriously? Are you sure you're reading the right magazine? OK, for the baffled grandparent reading over someone else's shoulder (get your own copy!) the Super Mario Brothers are Nintendo's pair of plumber brothers, Mario and Luigi. Yes, depending on who you ask, his name is Mario Mario. The most recognised gaming characters in the world alongside Pac-Man and Space Invaders, their platforming antics in the Mushroom Kingdom feature Koopas, pipes and kidnapped princesses. The games have sold hundreds of millions, beloved by hardcore fans and casual gamers alike.

THE FILM: Starring Bob Hoskins, somehow. Like a poisoned mushroom-induced fever dream this movie is a bewildering, joyless trudge through barely recognisable elements casually thrown in from the Mario universe. Hoskins would later claim in an interview with *The Guardian* it was the worst job he ever had, and his biggest disappointment. (Hey, at least he got paid and didn't have to watch it.) Nintendo would finally release a much more successful, faithful animated big-screen adaptation in 2023.

VERDICT MISS

WARCRAFT

Film, 2016, directed by Duncan Jones

THE GAME: The most massively massive of all massively multiplayer online roleplaying video games ever. Live since 2004, and steeped in every fantasy cliché you can think of and then some, *WoW* - as it's known - is ground zero for quests, elves, magic and the like. A virtual playground of beards and broadswords, *FIFA* it is not.

THE FILM: Despite the best efforts of *Moon* director Duncan Jones, the sluggish pacing and lumpen clichés earned the film few admirers, and it struggled to make back its bloated budget. Fans simply shrugged their shoulders and went back to grinding XP in their realms.

VERDICT MISS

RESIDENT EVIL

Film, 2002, directed by Paul WS Anderson

THE GAME: Japanese zombie series, which pretty much single-handedly popularised the survival horror subgenre. Set in Raccoon City, the games concerned zombie hoards infected with the mysterious T-virus created by the nefarious Umbrella corporation. The game set new standards for video game scares, and shifted an awful lot of PlayStations in the console's fledgling years.

THE FILM: Sure, bypassing the jump chills of the game series in favour of a more action-oriented take on the source material upset a few diehards. However, *Mortal Kombat* director Anderson's instincts were ultimately proven right: the film made more than triple its budget and the series went on to become one of the noughties' Teflon-coated money makers, a perennial box office juggernaut. A superficially more faithful 2021 reboot limped in way behind its cinematic predecessor, then a Netflix series fared even worse.

VERDICT HIT

IMAGES ISTOCK, GETTY

FALLOUT

TV series, 2024, Amazon Prime

THE GAME: As the title suggests, it's post-nuclear, baby. A futuristic fallout-smothered wasteland role playing series, with an eerie retro 1950s American art style, the series really picked up in popularity with its 2008 third iteration, published by Bethesda. Corporate mascot Vault Boy has become an icon in his own right.

THE SERIES: Starring Ella Purnell and Kyle MacLachlan and helmed by Geneva Robertson-Dworet, writer of the *Tomb Raider* reboot and *Captain Marvel*, the cash-happy series has a solid pedigree behind and in front of the camera. Set within the game's continuity, it's been lapped up by fans, and prompted a huge sales resurgence in the game series. Amazon have already greenlit a second series, and announced that everyone's favourite abandoned child Macaulay Culkin will be joining the cast in an as-yet unspecified role.

VERDICT HIT

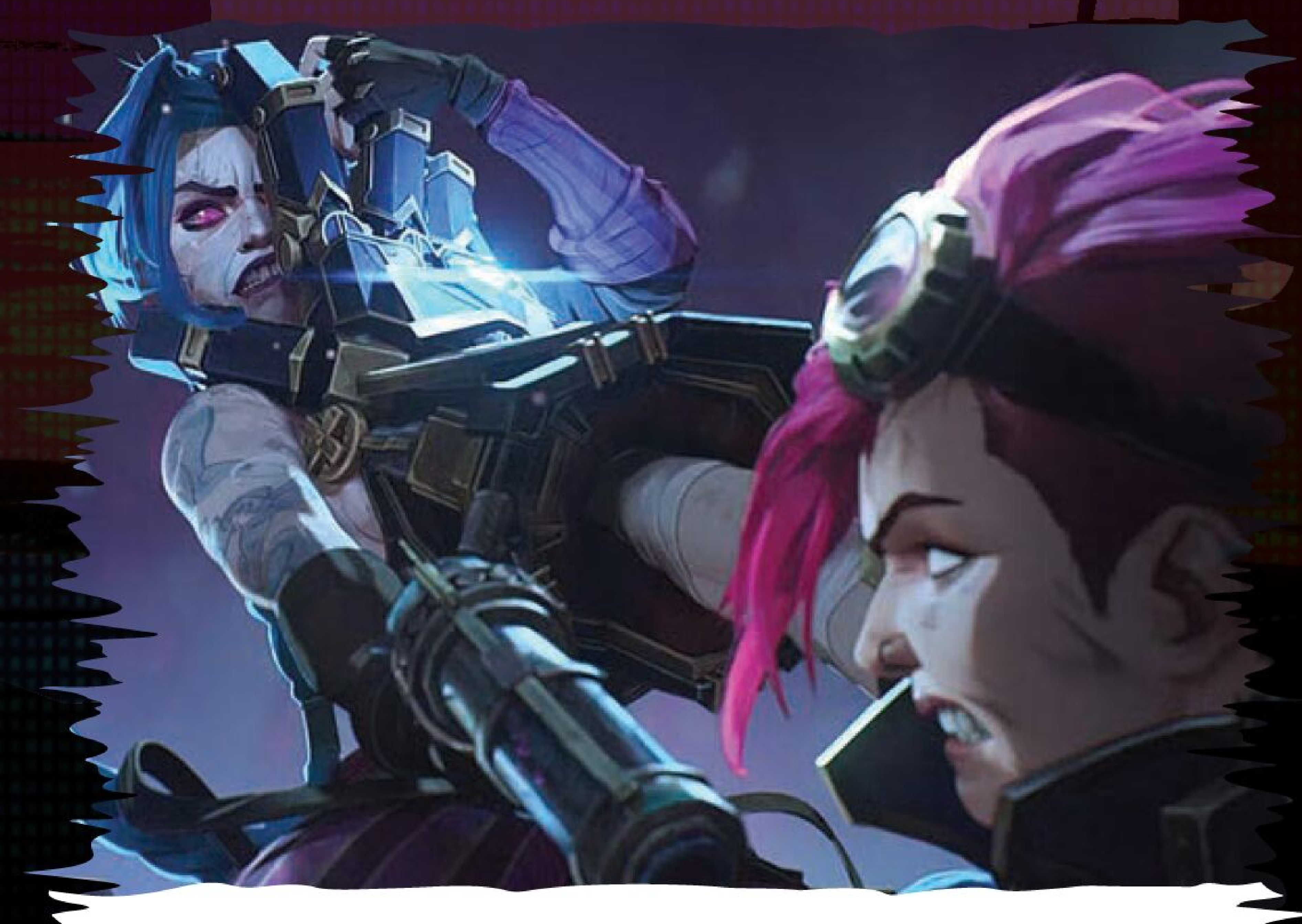
FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S

Film, 2023, directed by Emma Tammi

THE GAME: Wildly successful click-based horror series featuring animatronic psychopaths. Arguably more famous for its startling imagery and YouTube memes than the simplistic security camera-style gameplay, the murderous antics of Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria has made sole creator Scott Cawthon a multi-millionaire and then some.

THE FILM: Stuck in development hell for years with multiple directors attached, Freddy and creepy pals finally landed in time for Halloween, produced by horror supremo Jason Blum. Praised by fans for its faithful storytelling, visual accuracy and Matthew Lillard's adrenalised performance, critics were less impressed with its toothless terror and bloodless kills. Still, you can't argue with the box office, and almost hitting $300m on a $20m budget guaranteed a sequel, out later this year.

VERDICT HIT



ARCANE: LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

TV series, 2021-2024, Netflix

THE GAME: Phenomenally popular online battler. Its global success has attracted hundreds of millions of players, dedicated cosplay competitions and professional esports tournaments that garner viewing figures the Super Bowl can only dream of.

THE SERIES: Netflix's gamble on an IP that no one outside gaming had heard of paid off handsomely. The adult animation's two-season arc starred the voice talents of Hailee Steinfeld and Ella Purnell (her again) telling a story of sibling rivalry, lots of magic and fighting oppression. It bowled over critics, fans, and viewers, who praised its astonishing visuals and authentic characterisation.

VERDICT HIT

ALONE IN THE DARK

Film, 2005, directed by Uwe Boll

THE GAME: Awash with classic horror tropes (spooky mansions, scary monsters and a moor's worth of mist), the survival puzzle game series is in debt to masters of the genre, HP Lovecraft, HR Giger, and any film director who's ever thought to point a camera at something frightening.

THE FILM: Infamously inept filmmaker Uwe Boll insisted on changing the script, removing much of the suspense in favour of, "bimbo blonde archaeologists, sex scenes, mad scientists… *Matrix* slow-motion gun battles and car chases," as original scriptwriter Blair Erickson recounted bitterly to website *Something Awful*. A box office disaster, game developers Eden scrapped a planned tie-in release. It's fair to say that this is one film that should be left well alone. In the dark.

VERDICT MISS

EPISODE 9

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

THE SEASON FINALE BRINGS THE FIRST SERIES OF HBO'S ADAPTATION TO A SHATTERING CONCLUSION… BY DAVE GOLDER

THE INFO

Broadcast: 12 March 2023
Writers: Craig Mazin, Neil Druckmann
Director: Ali Abbasi

GUEST CAST

Merle Dandridge as Marlene
Ashley Johnson as Anna

THE STORY

In flashback: Ellie's mum, Anna, gives birth to Ellie after being bitten by an infected. When the Fireflies arrive, she urges Marlene to take care of Ellie, before begging to be killed. In the present: Joel and Ellie finally reach the Firefly hospital, but Joel is horrified to learn that Ellie must die to provide the cure. Joel goes postal, killing everyone in his path to save Ellie, then kills Marlene to make sure she can't follow them. Ellie has been unconscious throughout all this carnage; when she wakes Joel lies to her, saying the Firefly doctors couldn't find a cure so let her go.

THE INSIDE SKINNY

"We've seen Joel kill. We've seen him lose loved ones. So how do you take that any further? What if it's between saving all of humanity or this one girl? It's the easiest choice he's ever made in his life."

That's how Neil Druckmann sums up the knotty moral issue at the heart of the first season finale in the *Inside The Episode* featurette. For viewers it was certainly an emotional roller coaster ride. And as usual for this show, it was a seamless mix of audacious detours from the original and sequences from the game lovingly and accurately brought to live-action life.

One of those audacious detours opens the episode, with a flashback showing Ellie's birth in the midst of an infected attack during which her mother is bitten. The events may not have been seen before, but the idea had been rattling around Druckmann's head ever since the release of the first game.

It began life as a short story, intended for release as an animated short, but that fell through. Druckmann then considered repurposing the story as DLC (downloadable content, created as additional content for gamers to download after the initial release of a game) but nothing came of those plans either.

But when he started working with Craig Mazin developing the HBO series, "he'd asked me all these questions about the world," said Druckmann on the official podcast. "'What are some stories we haven't told?' I told him, 'Oh, here's this short story about Ellie's mom and how she gave birth, and she got bitten right before she gave birth, and had to cut the umbilical cord, and she wasn't sure if she'd passed on the infection or not.'"

Mazin's response was unequivocal: "Holy fuck, we're doing this!"

Both writers also immediately knew where the scene would fit in the series: as a cold open to the final episode. Not just because, "It hurts more!" as Mazin insisted on the podcast, but because in terms of themes, they liked the

FAST FACT
STUNT ACTOR KELSEY ANDRIES, WHO PLAYED THE INFECTED ATTACKING ANNA, SUSTAINED A BLACK EYE WHILE FILMING THE FIGHT SCENE.

mirroring it provided with Joel's actions later in the episode: the lengths parents will go to to save their children, and the lies they'll tell (by the end of the episode Joel is clearly shown to have taken on the role of Ellie's adoptive dad).

They were also immediately in agreement who should play Ellie's mum, Anna – Ashley Johnson, who'd voiced Ellie in the games.

GOOFS

The Salt Lake Temple, one of Salt Lake City's biggest landmarks, may seem oddly absent. It was encased in scaffolding when filmed for this ep, so it looks like it would have done in 2023 rather than 2003.

"She's already this quasi-mythological creature to me," Mazin told *Collider*, "and to see her giving birth to herself, in a sense, and to create that genetic connection between her performance as Ellie and the origin story of Bella [Ramsey] as Ellie, was just profound."

Johnson jumped at the chance to return to the franchise, and spent four days shooting her scenes. Episode director Ali Abbasi, however, was a little more hesitant at first, worried that it could come across as a mere gimmick. But after working with another franchise returnee, Troy Baker, in the previous episode, he began to appreciate the authenticity they brought to the episodes. "I felt like I was dealing with the mythology behind all this," he told the *LA Times*.

And after working with Johnson, Abbasi was full of praise for her: "When we were trying the costumes on, she was like, 'Yeah do whatever you want. You can do this, you can do that,' and... I felt like, 'Okay, this is someone who's an ally here,'" Abbasi told the *LA Times*. "It was actually a comfort to see she was not afraid of getting her hands dirty."

Showrunner Mazin was especially delighted with one ad-lib Johnson threw in: "'You're so tough,' was maybe my favourite line," he reveals in the podcast. "That was just [Johnson] having a natural, maternal response."

Baby Ellie was actually played by twins, one a boy, the other a girl. "The girl was a better actor than the boy," reveals Mazin in the official podcast. "One day, the boy will listen to this and be very bitter. Also, she was ultimately cheaper for us, because if we had to use the boy in certain scenes, we were gonna have to, like, digitally paint out his... you know..."

Exterior filming for the episode included the rather unusual location of Calgary Zoo. This, of course, was for the scene where Ellie and Joel encounter a giraffe while climbing a half-built tower block, a fan-favourite moment from the game.

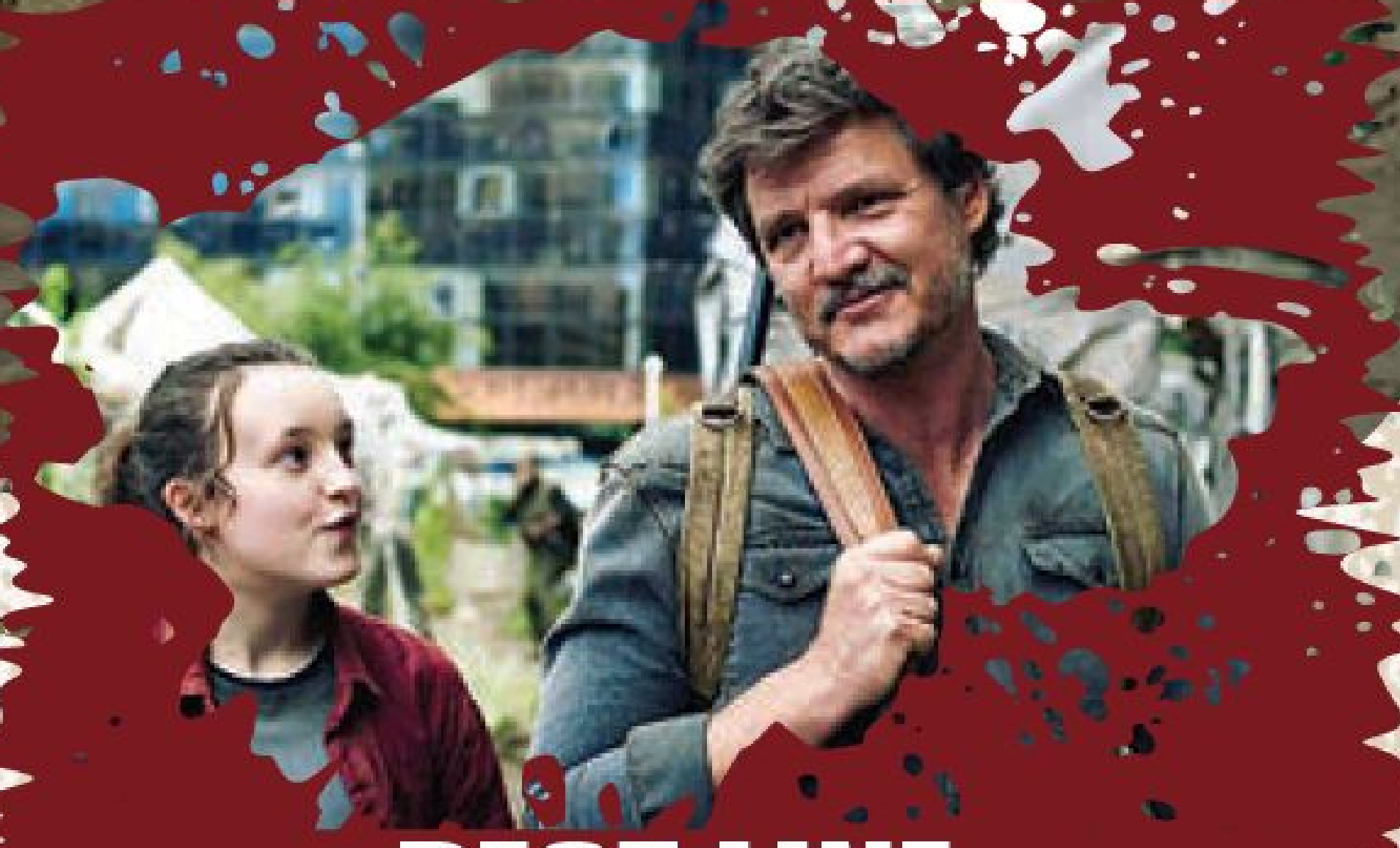
The scene was actually cut together from various locations, including a section of the construction site set built on a soundstage, the giraffe enclosure and they view beyond. But the giraffes were the real deal. In *Variety*, production designer John Paino described the sequence as, "probably the most complicated piecing together of [visual effects] stage, scenery, and location I've worked on."

This included a month-and-a-half's worth of prep to get the giraffes ready for filming.

"We needed to see if we could acclimate the giraffe to strangers feeding it, with a very small film crew there," Paino told *Variety*. "The trainers worked to get them to eat out of a stranger's hand."

The enclosure also had to be decked out with green screen panels (though they were actually

WESTERN
SHOWCASE
45WS203
CS 31



BEST LINE

ELLIE: "SO TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS, I GUESS."

JOEL: "IT WASN'T TIME THAT DID IT."

FAST FACT

JOEL'S STORY ABOUT HIS SUICIDE ATTEMPT WAS WRITTEN FOR THE SERIES AND IS NOT MENTIONED IN THE GAME.

80 WEST
Reno
EXIT 309
15 NORTH
Salt Lake City
H

blue screen panels, as the scene on screen would feature lots of green foliage making actual green screens impractical). This was so that the show's visual effects supervisor, Alex Wang, could isolate the giraffes and digitally insert them into the construction set.

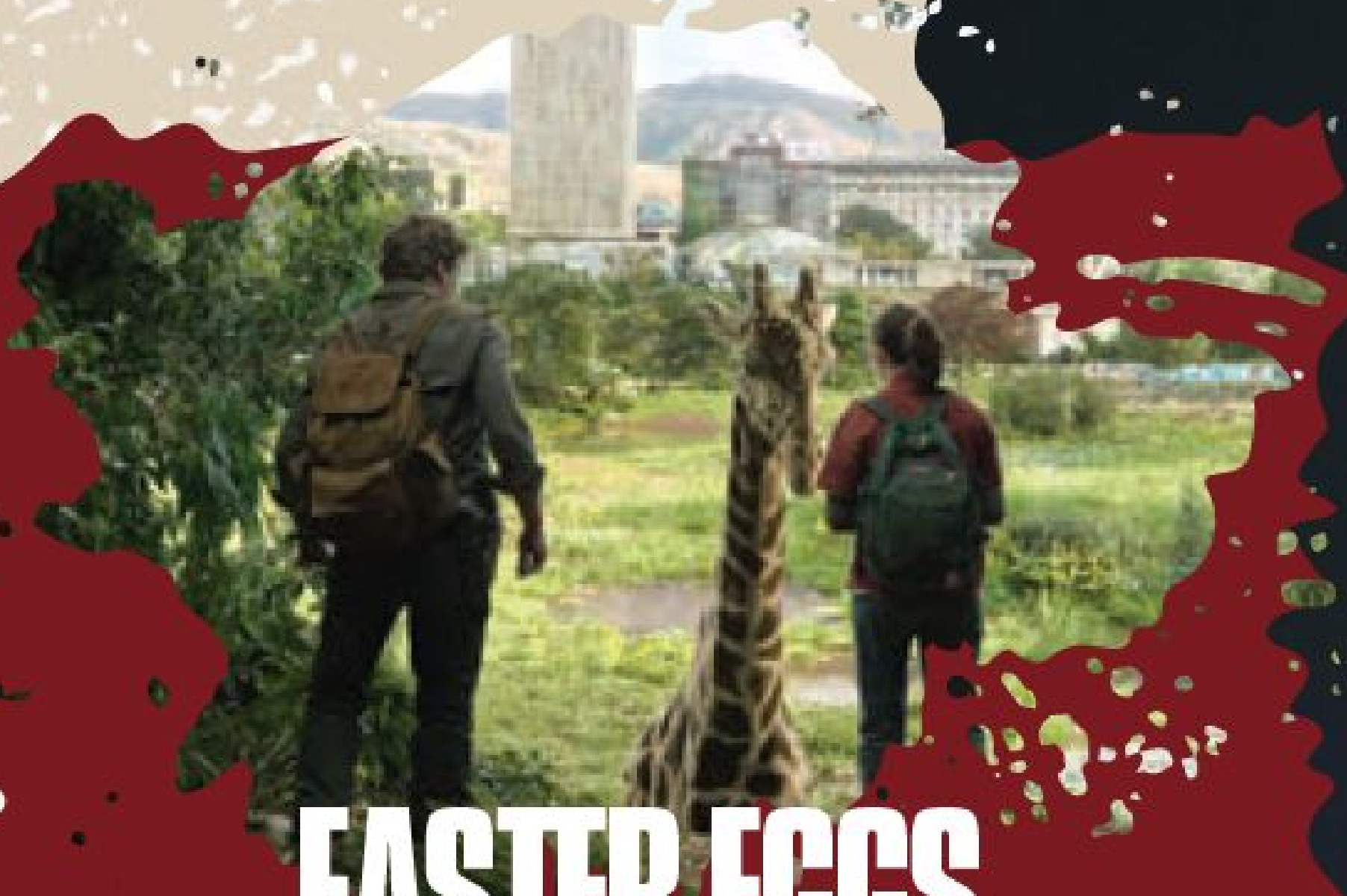
The other major location for the episode was Queen Elizabeth II Ambulatory Care Centre (a former hospital that had been replaced with a new facility a couple of years before) in Grande Prairie, Alberta, which would provide the corridors for Joel's rampage to save Ellie.

Production designer John Paino had built the vast majority of the interiors for season one on sound stages, and thought he'd have to do the same in this case. But the disused hospital proved ideal, though his team did give it a bit of a makeover… to age it, as well as add some Easter Eggy details.

"We wanted to make sure the murals in the game when Joel gets to the paediatric wing were the same," he told *Variety*.

FAST FACT

WHEN DIRECTOR ALI ABBASI FELL ILL WITH COVID, CRAIG MAZIN STEPPED IN TO DIRECT SOME OF THE ANNA SCENES AND JOEL TALKING ABOUT HIS SUICIDE ATTEMPT.



EASTER EGGS

The episode's title is the last line of the Fireflies' slogan, "When you're lost in the darkness, look for the light", which we saw written on a wall in graffiti in the first episode, *When You're Lost In The Darkness.* That's what writers call mirroring.

Anna sings a tremulous version of A-ha's 1985 hit *The Sun Always Shines On TV* to baby Ellie. In *Left Behind* we see that Ellie owns a copy of A-ha's greatest hits album *Headlines And Deadlines*, and another of their hits, *Take On Me* also features on that episode's soundtrack.

The appearance of the real giraffes in this episode was foreshadowed in the season premiere, with a plush giraffe toy in Sarah's bedroom. Giraffe images are common in the video game too.

Laura Bailey, who voices Abby Anderson in the video game *The Last Of Us Part II* (and also voiced a nurse in the first game), makes a cameo appearance as one of the nurses in the operating theatre.

STAR TURN

ASHLEY JOHNSON AS ELLIE'S MOM

Any writer who didn't single out Ashley Johnson for her appearance in *Look For The Light* would probably be hunted down and savagely pilloried by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann. Because, of course, she's not just an actor playing a role; she is the original voice of Ellie from the games playing Ellie's mom in the series. Which is kinda beautiful. To be honest, she could have phoned in her performance and it would still have been poignant. Instead, she gives it everything and then some. Sob.

FAST FACT
ASHLEY JOHNSON MADE A HANDWRITTEN COPY OF A NOTE THAT ANNA WROTE FOR ELLIE IN THE GAME, THEN KEPT IT IN HER POCKET, ALONG WITH THE POCKET KNIFE ANNA PASSES ON TO ELLIE, WHILE SHOOTING HER SCENES.

Mazin admits on the podcast that deciding the music for Joel's rampage was a far from easy process. "The music choice here was incredibly important... there were all sorts of versions, and the first versions, as you might expect, had sort of, you know, more action music or darker music. And it was making me all crazy. So, what do I do? I go back to Gustavo Santaolalla [the composer for both the series' and games' incidental music], and I just start listening and listening and listening [to everything he's done]. And I'm like, 'Wait, what if we took the saddest music he's written?'"

And so season one comes to an end. With a lie, in a scene nearly identical to the game.

"For all the fun we have changing things," said Mazin on the podcast, "there are times where you just don't. Because you change the end of *The Last Of Us*, you're a fucking idiot." ■

IMAGES GETTY, SKY, HBO

WHERE NEXT?

AS ONE OF HBO'S MOST POPULAR DRAMAS, WE'RE IMAGINING THE CABLE GIANT HAS BIG PLANS FOR *THE LAST OF US*, POST-SEASON TWO. BUT WHERE WILL THE SHOW GO FROM HERE, AND WILL WE BE SEEING ANY SPIN-OFFS OR SEQUELS? WE ASKED OUR WRITERS TO SPECULATE ABOUT WHAT MIGHT BE COMING TO *THE LAST OF US'* TV UNIVERSE…

DAVE GOLDER

With the showrunners revealing that seasons two and three will be based on the game *The Last Of Us Part II*, it's interesting to speculate where the show might go beyond that.

Avoiding talking about specific characters, the show needs to stay true to its heart; as much as it's tempting to hope for *World War C(ordyceps)* this isn't a zombie-attack-of-the-week show. It's a character-driven show about ethics.

So it might be interesting to have a time-jump of a couple of decades to see a world where humans have learned more about their fungal bad guys; how to coexist with them while rebuilding a semblance of civilisation. Would humanity even find a way of commodifying or exploiting Cordyceps? Would some humans even start advocating for Cordyceps rights? What did the apocalypse mean for religion? Do the infected have souls?

And what if there is a cure now, but someone finds out it was as the result of women facing execution, who were forced into pregnancy then allowed to be bitten? How many women died before another immune baby was born?

ROB LOCKWOOD

For the moment, I'm just happy for *The Last Of Us* to continue down the path that Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann have set it on. The show is excellent and the last thing it needs is to become a diluted *Walking Dead*-style franchise that never knows when to call it quits. With all that said, as season one proved with episodes like *Long, Long Time*, the show is often at its best when it's telling almost self-contained stories. With that in mind I wouldn't mind seeing an anthology show that focused on different characters – new and returning – in different locations and time periods in the show's canon. You could do both super cool deep-lore stuff (what's going on in some of the other QZs? How did the Fireflies start?) and emotional character-led stories. And why not bring Anna Torv back for a Joel and Tess tale? Whatever they do, I hope that Mazin and Druckmann keep their hands on the tiller to ensure the high quality we've come to expect.

MILES HAMER

Where do we go after season two…? Once we've run out of game to adapt, I'm curious to see where they take the story. The opportunity is there to move forward in a completely different direction, effectively giving game and TV writer Neil Druckmann two divergent, parallel plots for each medium. Exciting!

Another point: is Ellie's story over now? Her character arc felt wrapped up. Would fandom accept that conclusion to her story and losing brilliant Bella Ramsey?

If so, could Mazin and Druckmann treat that as a complete closed chapter, and concentrate on another group of survivors, anthology-style? Maybe something lighter in tone; it's hardly been rainbows and giggles so far. A bit of light to shore up the shade would be appreciated. (Although confusingly I'd also like even more grisly infected action please.) Basically, anything that expands on the lore, gives us compelling characters, and kicks ass.

RICHARD EDWARDS

The Walking Dead has done the never-ending zombie saga thing to, well, death, and continues to unleash the undead hordes in a variety of spin-offs. For that reason I have no appetite to see *The Last Of Us* live forever, as brilliant as it is.

I hope it's allowed to unfold as if it was a long standalone movie, with an obvious beginning, middle and end. Rather than being ground zero for a vast *The Last Of Us*-verse, the show needs to remember that Joel/Ellie are its beating heart. The conclusion of their arc should be the end of the story, because without them, it's just A-N-Other zombie drama. If a happy ending is too much to ask for, let's at least give them a hopeful one. After everything they've already been through, they deserve it.

I'd also like to see Dr Neuman (the scientist played by John Hannah in episode one) returning to tell the world, "I told you so!" Admittedly, he's either long dead or a walking toadstool by now, but he deserves his moment in the sun.

STEVE O'BRIEN

Although HBO is likely tempted to create an ecosystem of *The Last Of Us*-related TV shows, I'm hoping that they restrain themselves. *The Walking Dead*'s novelty had worn out way before it finally bowed out, and now we have a plethora of splinter shows, none of which seem to have made a cultural impact beyond the still-loyal hardcore. If HBO are planning spin-offs away from *The Last Of Us* mothership, I hope they make them miniseries, telling specific stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. It would be great, for instance, to have a limited series exploring the early days of the outbreak, maybe even telling the story of Joel in the aftermath of Sarah's murder. And I'd love to see something set in *The Last Of Us* universe, but outside of America. What, for instance, is going down in the Britain of *The Last Of Us*' 2023? Do we have our own version of FEDRA and the Fireflies? Is there a Joel-type figure that, I dunno, David Tennant can play? So, yeah, plenty of scope for extra stories, but my hope is that HBO don't flood us with series and TV movies. We've seen what overkill has done to the *Star Wars* and Marvel brands. ■

> "I'D LOVE TO SEE SOMETHING SET IN *THE LAST OF US* UNIVERSE, BUT OUTSIDE OF AMERICA. WHAT, FOR INSTANCE, IS GOING DOWN IN THE BRITAIN OF *THE LAST OF US* 2023? DO WE HAVE OUR OWN VERSION OF FEDRA AND THE FIREFLIES?"
> *STEVE O'BRIEN*

IMAGES SKY, HBO

THE LAST OF US IN NUMBERS

$10 MILLION

AVERAGE BUDGET FOR EACH EPISODE OF THE TV SHOW

36

AGE OF JOEL IN THE 2003 SEGMENT OF THE TV SERIES

NUMBER OF GOLDEN GLOBE NOMINATIONS **3**

4,900%

INCREASE IN STREAMS OF LINDA RONSTADT'S *LONG, LONG TIME* AFTER THE BROADCAST OF EPISODE THREE

LINDA RONSTADT
LONG, LONG TIME
NOBODYS

32 MILLION

AVERAGE US VIEWERSHIP FOR EACH EPISODE OF SEASON ONE

15

INCHES OF HAIR BELLA RAMSEY CUT OFF TO PLAY ELLIE

24

AGE OF PEDRO PASCAL WHEN HE APPEARED IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

17

AGE OF BELLA RAMSEY WHEN THEY WERE CAST AS 14-YEAR-OLD ELLIE

96%

SERIES ONE'S APPROVAL RATING ON REVIEW-AGGREGATION WEBSITE *ROTTEN TOMATOES*

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